

Shulamith Lev-Aladgem

Bare Theatre of a Bare Life: a Community-Based Project in Jaffa

In this article Shulamith Lev-Aladgem focuses on *The Bride from the Sea*, a community performance by three young Israeli-Palestinian mothers, presented in a sand box in a multi-functional kindergarten in Jaffa in 2008. From the beginning of the creative process, the Jewish facilitator and the performers had to struggle to overcome the various barriers erected by the intricate, oppressive daily life of the young Palestinian women. They eventually managed to perform a 'short, thin performance', which, despite resembling a misperformance, had an emotional and even exceptional effect on the audience. This performance is examined as a special kind of women-based community theatre, termed here 'the bare theatre', to indicate a form that articulates the bare daily life of women trapped between internal and external oppressive power regimes. Shulamith Lev-Aladgem is chair of the Theatre Arts Department at Tel Aviv University, a trained actress, and a community-based theatre practitioner. Her recent publications include *Theatre in Co-Communities: Articulating Power* (2010) and *Standing Front Stage: Resistance, Celebration, and Subversion in Israeli Community-Based Theatre* (2010), as well as articles in *Research in Drama Education* and *Israeli Sociology*.

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SOMETIMES the challenge to articulate a performance and save it from oblivion may only occur long after experiencing it. One afternoon in June 2008 a community-based performance took place in Jaffa, a mixed town of Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians, which belongs to the city of Tel Aviv in the centre of Israel.¹ *The Bride from the Sea* was the final, public stage of a collaborative theatre project of the community-based studies section of the Theatre Department at Tel Aviv University and the Welfare Department of Tel Aviv Municipality.²

The performance was unusual from the outset, atypical of prevalent community-based theatre projects in Israel. It took place in a kindergarten – more specifically, in the sand box of the playground. Around it colourful mats were spread out, with the children's small chairs around them, and behind them ordinary white plastic chairs, which completed the simple, natural amphitheatre. In the fading light of the sunset, and in front of a mixed and excited audience of family members, the kindergarten staff, professionals, and students from the fields of

theatre, social work, and education, as well as several neighbours watching from the nearby balconies, three young Palestinian mothers – Raida Abu-Halifa, Nawal Shattat, and Dunia Biari – performed *The Bride from the Sea*, based on the daily experiences of these young women from Jaffa, which were revealed via a creative process that had taken about six months.

The Bride from the Sea was markedly 'thin', comprising just three short scenes, and was performed by only three participants, which hardly constituted a theatre group. The three young mothers performed a few fragments of their harsh lives in Arabic, against the background music of Farid El Atrash and the recorded sound of the sea. Their mise-en-scène in the small sand box was basic, simple, and economical, accompanied by a few ordinary accessories from daily life. Moreover, they appeared to be encountering difficulty in memorizing the text, when something unexpected happened. The three young Palestinian women were assisted by another young woman, their Jewish facilitator and director, who moved protectively behind the

audience, providing her performers with any forgotten lines in celebratory, loud Arabic, as if she were an invisible mental extension of the three performers.

At what appeared to be the end of the performance, following the audience's applause, it suddenly became clear that the short performance was to have an additional part. Although the Jewish spectators had received a Hebrew translation of the text in advance, the three women now repeated the performance. This time, sitting on white plastic chairs in front of the audience, they read the text in Hebrew, employing the previous Arabic intonation.

The raw, thin performativity of the whole event, ostensibly resembling an unready community-based performance, was nevertheless touching, stirring, and exciting. The discrepancy between what looked like a mis-performance and the inner, emotional, exceptional experience, evoked an ongoing disturbing feeling. The words to make sense of such an experience are those aptly expressed by Homi Bhabha: 'I felt there was something I had to say, something I could mouth without words, something my hands could sketch in the air, yet something I couldn't get hold of.'³

Such a moment can happen when our prevailing interpretive terms and concepts fail to express the complexity of the different and the new. The consideration of whether there was indeed anything exceptional in *The Bride from the Sea*, and what this might be, necessitated a long personal and intellectual journey in search of the right words in which to speak of this performance.

A Feminist Kindergarten in a Mixed Town

My present study of the entire performance text, including the creative process, the consolidation of the dramatic text, the rehearsals, the public performance, and its reception sets out to answer the questions: what were the contextual circumstances that had generated the outstanding performativity of *The Bride from the Sea*; how did such performativity signify the women's articulation from below, that is, from a subordinate

position; and what did it reveal about the gendered and politicized daily life of the three young Palestinian mothers?

The kindergarten in Jaffa is a multi-functional centre for Jews and Palestinians, providing daycare services for infants and young children, and also offering to their mothers and older siblings various creative and educational activities. The mothers are provided with courses, especially in relation to parenthood, education, and occupation. Mia Hod, head of the Jewish and Palestinian professional staff, asserts that:

ideologically the centre operates on the basis of a feminist and a multi-cultural approach, facilitating marginal communities to articulate cultural diversity. We opt for the constitution of a new, alternative communal culture that would be based on multi-culturalism.⁴

As such, the multi-functional kindergarten in Jaffa is a clear example of a special enclave that can be established in mixed towns, enabling the direct co-existence of Jews and Palestinians.

In Jaffa, as in other mixed towns such as Haifa, Lod, Ramle, or Acre, Jews and Palestinians live in physical proximity, and share the same municipal system and public services. However, this formal closeness is often precisely what causes the Palestinians to feel acutely trapped, experiencing that double marginality of both national and municipal oppression. Generally, Palestinians in Israel are a trapped minority whose life is shaped by the contradictions and tensions fomented by the socio-geographical demarcation of their living space, and compounded by the deprivation and disruption of possibilities for existence within an already confined space. Such a policy has the effect of tightening local bonds and reinforcing the Palestinians' collective identity.⁵

Thus, the mixed town poignantly demonstrates the problematic macro-national order, as regards the Palestinians, of both separation and integration, in-between inclusion and exclusion, cultural incorporation and spatial division.⁶ Palestinian women in a mixed town face a triple marginality since, besides the external national and municipal

oppression, they also suffer from intra-communal gender oppression imposed by the male figures in their families.

This internal oppressive regime functions as a gauge by which the Palestinian group measures its ability to preserve some kind of independence and singularity.⁷ Mia Hod confirms this more specifically:

They are completely forbidden to leave their home, except when they take their kids to the medical clinic or bring them here to the kindergarten. This place is their only social centre, and even here they are allowed to participate only in short, one-time activities, which have to be related only to their children's education.⁸

Nevertheless, as Dan Rabinowitz and Daniel Monterescu contend, a mixed town is also a 'twilight area', creating hybrid, interim spaces where Jews and Palestinians can establish and consolidate subversive forms of social life.⁹ The kindergarten in Jaffa sought to become such a hybrid, third space from the outset, circumventing the macro-national order through its urban feminist and multi-cultural logic. However, the desired encounter between Jewish and Palestinian women, which, it was hoped, would lead to the formation of an alternative communal culture, remained more a vision than a reality, since the Jewish inhabitants avoided the place almost completely.

Thus, it was the theatre project discussed here that managed, against all odds, to realize the kindergarten as a feminist third space, which articulated muted voices and represented yet another rare growth in the contradictory processes of exclusion and inclusion that characterize the urban, mixed space of Jaffa.

The singularity of the theatre project stemmed from the rare feminist, artistic coalition it created on the 'borderline' between the Jewish theatre facilitator, the Palestinian mothers, and the Jewish and Palestinian staff. Gloria Anzaldúa refers to those psychological, mental, and sexual borderlines that are physically created in places where people of different social status and different ethnic or racial origins share the same territory. At such borderlines, she

notes, different cultures seep into each other, encouraging the people to meet as subjects, to confront fear of the 'other' personally, and to reduce the distance between them.

Moreover, Anzaldúa claims that such a borderline may generate a new story, one that is based on the personal testimonies of those who live on the border and may be performed through popular art. *The Bride from the Sea*, as detailed in the following, demonstrates such an articulation of the borderline, a women's popular art – a performance based on the personal life experiences of young Palestinian mothers who live in Jaffa. Such a performance could have been generated only in as well as out of the national and local particular context of the kindergarten in Jaffa.

Creative Process as Public Event

In order to capture the singularity of *The Bride from the Sea* it was necessary to focus not only on the public performance and its reception, but also on the entire theatrical event in its extended boundaries. Richard Schechner notes that each performance comprises three sequential events: the proto-performance, which includes the rehearsal phase; the performance itself in front of the audience; and the aftermath, which includes everything that happens after the performance such as critiques, articles, and the constitution of archives.¹⁰

This model is especially important in the study of Israeli community-based performances since it includes the creative process: the engagement of the local unprofessional performers, the consolidation of these performers into a cohesive group, the disclosure of life materials through theatrical devices, the scripting of the original play, and its production (the rehearsals) into a public performance.

However, the core of Schechner's model is still obviously the public performance; and community-based theatre, like the professional theatre, seeks to produce the public performance as an autonomous event, whose reception does not depend on being familiar with the creative process that made it. The

thin performativity of *The Bride from the Sea* challenged this approach, and led to rethinking the accepted separation between the implicit, hidden creative process and the explicit, public performance.

Here, the ability to grasp the uniqueness of the performance could happen only after revealing its creative process, without which it might have mistakenly been interpreted as a misperformance. Therefore, it was necessary to replace Schechner's rigid model with a more flexible one that dismantles the borderline between the proto-performance and the performance, and emphasizes the importance of discussing the 'hidden' preparatory work as integral to the performance as such.

In this new fluid model, the approach to the aftermath also has to be changed. The marginal position of community-based theatre in Israel does not lend itself to critical studies in the written and/or electronic media. Nor does it encourage financial bodies to allocate a budget for proper documentation and the organization of an archive. Thus, there is also a need to replace these components with those that will be more useful for the study of community-based theatre. The researcher, like the archaeologist, meticulously looks for every bit of information, organizing the scattered pieces into a meaningful text, which is presented in the academic sphere to addressees who do not usually attend community-based performances.

The present study is based on several factors: the personal experience of the researcher; the written script by the facilitator and director, Anat Levi; the original texts that she wrote after the project; the in-depth interviews with Levi and with Mia Hod, the head of the staff; and Levi's notebook to which she referred during the interviews.

A theatre facilitator/director necessarily always dedicates extensive mental and physical resources in order to produce a community-based performance. The history of Israeli community-based theatre is full of examples detailing the problems and difficulties that facilitators and groups encountered during their projects. Nonetheless, they eventually managed to establish consistent and growing creative processes, and pro-

duced meaningful public performances for local audiences.¹¹ In the case discussed here, Levi encountered an unfamiliar situation, which disturbed and disrupted the usual development of the creative process, and which differed completely from her previous engagement with community-based theatre.

Coalescing, despite the Fragile Process

The facilitator/director's notebook reveals that she persistently sought to reach out to the Palestinian mothers. She waited for them in the kindergarten day after day, provided them with leaflets in Arabic, and repeatedly phoned them. Yet, although they showed interest and promised to come, they only participated sporadically and were always late. Each theatrical encounter was thus conditional. Sometimes no women arrived at all while, in other cases, four participants comprised the largest group. The way the young mothers explained their strange behaviour sounded to Levi like 'excuses plucked from the air'.¹²

Levi's perceptual failure, despite her good will, stemmed from her privileged position in relation to the Palestinian women. The social, political, and cultural distance that Jews usually maintain with regard to Palestinians as Others, led Levi to interpret the Palestinian mothers' behaviour only from her own point of view. At first, Levi reacted negatively to the whole idea of a theatre project: 'Why Arabs now? Why couldn't I get a project with Jewish Ethiopians, for example? What do I know about Arabs?'¹³ The project also awoke personal experience:

I'm afraid of them. I'm from Jerusalem. As a girl I was afraid to go near construction sites where Arabs used to work, or travel on buses that might be blown up by Arab terrorists, or even to come home late at night. And my father was wounded by a Palestinian in the first Intifada.¹⁴

In the first encounter, Levi asked the few participants to present themselves through some object that was available to them. Here she heard, for the first time, about their harsh, oppressed life with their husbands and their husbands' families, the prohibition

on singing and playing, even in front of other women, and the restriction of their outdoor activities in general, and in the kindergarten, in particular.

In the second encounter, Levi listened to more personal testimonies of the fragile and at-risk lives of these mothers. Such specific evidence was even more complicated, divisive, and hybrid than the critical sociological discourse on Palestinian women in Jaffa, as already noted. Some of them were married to Palestinian men from Gaza whose legal position was unclear, and thus they were either in constant hiding or simply living alone with their children, without any support.

Other women were married to Jewish husbands, or were daughters of mixed marriages, and thus their own status was unclear. Still others had relatives both in the Israeli army and in Gaza. Other women had come to Jaffa from distant villages and were controlled not only by their husbands, but also by the old women of the men's families. These young women, as Levi learnt from her early meetings with them, lived in constant danger, threatened physically and mentally and struggling for economic survival. They told Levi that 'We don't have friends, especially after marriage, every one of us is alone.'¹⁵

Achieving Empathy

On acquiring this information for the first time, the deep fear of 'Arabs' that Levi had brought with her to the kindergarten soon became merged with another disturbing feeling: 'Oh boy, I am the conqueror!'¹⁶ The actual physical encounter with the young Palestinian women and her exposure to their harsh life encouraged Levi to seek a connection between them and herself. She thought: 'Then again, my mother is Swedish and my father is Persian so I myself am a bit Arab.'¹⁷

The moment when Levi acknowledged the Mizrahi Arab component of her own identity (of Jews originating from Arab countries) and whatever inner conflict that she may have had because of it, was not simple but it was vital. She linked a piece of her own identity to that of the Palestinian mothers in order to be able to empathize and

identify with them. The first step for the coalition between the Jewish facilitator and the Palestinian women was established.

Levi had recognized that the theatre project, which, from the outset, was initiated for the empowerment of the mothers themselves and demanded a long-term process, was essentially a subversive operation which the mothers would have difficulty in joining. But she would fight for them with all her power. Levi was now able to understand these mothers' daily difficulties. Her deep empathy, her ability to relinquish her authority and power, and her persistence in sustaining the encounters no matter what, gained the confidence and trust of the Palestinian participants, who felt safe to speak out about their daily experiences: 'Here the atmosphere is different. We can forget everything. We are allowed to cry.'¹⁸

Levi writes in her notebook: 'I couldn't do much "theatre" with them; in the lack of proper conditions for the project there was no possibility of developing the knowledge or skills of theatre.'¹⁹ Even so, the simple playing encouraged the women to free their inner voices for the first time. For example, in one of the encounters Levi brought a pile of secondhand clothing, including a variety of hats, high-heeled shoes, army uniforms, and Muslim head-scarves (hijabs).

The young Palestinian women immediately took advantage of this and began to dress up. One secular woman deliberately chose to wrap herself in a black hijab and, acting as a religious Muslim woman, she presented some of the secular women's inner conflict as to whether to wear the hijab or not. Another participant, half Jewish and a very religious Muslim with a hijab, chose to dress up as an Israeli soldier. Playing this part, she said:

I have just come back from East Jerusalem. I'm always tired. I've checked many women. I wish I could rest now. Since I'm half Jewish, half Arab, I decided to join the army. I treat everybody as human beings. I like being in the army. I like my uniform. Sometimes, when I cross the road in Jaffa, I hear my community members whispering behind my back. They don't approve of me. But I don't care.²⁰

This improvisation showed that, despite the internal and external oppressions, the young Palestinian women were well acquainted with the political situation. This identity play also demonstrated subversive and utopian viewpoints. On the one hand, the Palestinian actress expresses her wish to move from her hybrid, low position to the Jewish, powerful, side of her mixed identity. On the other hand, she appropriated playing in order to intervene and amend the political situation by presenting a humanist soldier who treats the Palestinians he has to check first and foremost as human beings.

The second time, this participant chose high-heeled shoes, mini-skirt, and extravagant hat. Acting out the *femme fatale*, she said:

I'm Cicciolina. I'm Christian. I'm on a wonderful trip. You catch me right now in a five-star, very elegant hotel in Paris. I'm on my honeymoon. I have a prince that fulfils all my dreams. I love shopping and the good life. And I'm not faithful to the prince. I have other men, too.²¹

A Liberated Performativity

This carnivalesque, upside-down kind of playing temporarily managed to dismantle the building blocks of external and internalized power regimes, resulting in an outpouring of femininity and sexuality. Such liberated performativity deviated from the regular gender-acts that these women perform in their daily lives. The theatrical playing allowed the Palestinian women to assume an alternative gender performativity, which they assumed as subject actresses.²² Through such performativity, within the Janus-frame of theatrical playing, each of the women could testify to how her life hangs by a thread:

We are third-rate citizens; I'm stuck; I have brothers in the Israeli army and also a family in Gaza; The man can do what he wants; the man always controls; Arab men's thinking is backward; even if you are divorced you have to give an account to the men in the family; I shouldn't have married, then I wouldn't suffer so much. My husband is not here legally, my life is always in danger; I want to be alone sometimes, for myself, only. I'm never just myself, not even one per cent, I belong a hundred per cent to society; I'm longing to go to the sea.²³

After about three months, the protected playing space, despite its fragile, broken, and conditional nature, managed to reinforce and consolidate the process of coalition that slowly developed not only between the Jewish director and the Palestinian mothers, but also among the Palestinian mothers themselves. This coalition empowered the director and three of the mothers to move on to the writing of their self-initiated script, although, as Levi said: 'As a matter of fact I wasn't sure until the last minute that there would be a performance. But my strong feelings were that these women deserved to go on the stage, to feel like queens.'²⁴

When Dunia Biari, one of the three performers, did not show up one day, Levi decided to go to her home:

I arrive at the place. I stand under the window and shout 'Duniaaaaa'. Silence, nobody answers. I shout again, louder: 'Duniaaaaa.' Dunia looks out of the window: 'Nobody told me the rehearsal is here. It is not nice.' I shout: 'Open the door. I don't want to talk to you like this.' She throws me the keys. I'm going up. I'm nervous. I'm hot, so many stairs. I think to myself: how does she climb so many stairs, every day, with a baby carriage? I enter her home. The kids are shouting, the sink is full of dishes, the table is on the sofa, and Dunia is cleaning the floor. A baby is clinging on to her. The TV is at full volume on some Lebanese station. Another baby wants her boobs, and then another starts crying. 'You see', she says. 'This is my life.'²⁵

This moment, when Biari was ready to accept Levi in to her own home and fully show herself before her, was another crucial step in the coalition process between Levi and the three Palestinian mothers. The journey of the Jewish facilitator up the staircase, and her shock at what she found behind the door, deepened her sensitivity and empathy for the three young mothers. Thus, while Biari was looking at Levi, who looked back at her and saw 'This is my life', the bond between them was forged, extending the borderline beyond the kindergarten and engendering an artistic process out of which *The Bride from the Sea* would eventually emerge.

'Let's start the rehearsal,' Dunia said persistently. While sitting and breast-feeding two of her children, she begins her monologue in Hebrew: 'Ho, the big end of the

school year holiday, a little girl in front of the sea.²⁶ Suddenly five of Dunia's husband's sisters, all wearing the hijab, entered the room. Dunia stood up, greeted them in Arabic and kissed each of them twice, once on each cheek. Levi understood that the rehearsal was over. At the door, Dunia calmed her: 'Don't worry, by the show I'll learn the words.'²⁷

The bond between Dunia and Levi was strengthened in the rehearsals to follow, which included the other two performers, Raida Abu-Halifa and Nawal Shattat, and Hanna Vazana-Grinvald, Levi's supervisor, who began to attend the rehearsals with her own children, who played with those of the performers. The female coalition was transformed to a form of female *communitas*, manifested in the public performance through Levi's action – that is, as she stood behind the audience and participated in the event not as a theatre prompter but as an auxiliary actress, echoing the text in Arabic, as if it were her mother tongue. Such unusual behaviour, which initially seemed to be a performance failure (prompting, for example, the idea that the Palestinian women had forgotten their lines), was in fact a feature of the borderline noted earlier and which could be grasped as such only after one became aware of the whole, unusual creative process.

A 'Thin' Feminine Morphology

The theory of feminist theatre, which was mainly shaped during the 1980s and 1990s, stemmed from the core principle that operating within the given theatrical conventions meant continuing to reproduce 'woman as sign'. In order to position women on stage as subjects, new representational devices were needed, or at least a subversion of the symbolic order had to be sought through negativity, aggression, and negation.

A 'feminine morphology' can be characterized by several strong preferences: opposing realism in general, or suggesting a new form of realism; rejecting the basic linear and hierarchical plot structure and characterization; searching, instead, for elliptical, ambiguous, simultaneous, and interrupted modes

of expression without a sense of a narrative beginning, middle, and end; with several protagonists instead of one central character; and focusing on the lives of women in relation to other women and men from the female perspective.²⁸

In terms of the preceding discussion concerning the integral nature of the creative process of *The Bride from the Sea* with respect to its theatrical event, thin performativity should be regarded as a part of feminine morphology. Its singular manifestations will be evident through the remaining study of the play and the performance.

At the thirteenth meeting, in which the three mothers who would eventually perform in the sand box were present, Levi helped them to assemble all the subjects that had already come up in order to choose one of them as the basis for the play. The Palestinian women chose the sea as their core idea and, accordingly, the title of the performance, the mini-play, and its minimalist thin stage production all revolved around the sea/sand as the central and integrating image.

According to Michel de Certeau, the tactics by which marginalized groups use cultural systems or products for their own needs are those of poaching poetics, since the marginalized are 'like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write'.²⁹ The Palestinian mothers, in this case, live their daily lives as nomads without licence, poaching their survival across dangerous fields they did not establish.

The leading subversive verbal and stage image of these Palestinian nomads was the sea. For them, it was the fantasy of freedom: 'To go to the sea and lie on the sand as I did when I was a little girl.'³⁰ For Levi, the Jewish staff, and also for me, this seemed such a tiny fantasy, even a 'misfantasy'. Yet, for the Palestinian mothers it signalled their total yearning for liberation. The sea, however, was a double-edged, subversive image in that it articulated both the fantasy of freedom 'to be alone by the sea, to sense the soft sand, and not to be afraid of anything', as well as the nightmare of the women's daily poaching: 'Our community, religion, and men are a trauma, like drowning.'³¹

Jaffa is called by the Palestinians, even today, 'the bride of Palestine', commemorating it as the cosmopolitan and modern city of Palestinian society before 1948. However, the young Palestinian mothers chose another name here for Jaffa, 'the bride from the sea', not as a feminine romantic alternative, but as a subversive, feminist message, connecting their personal experience and their political reality, thus perceiving today's Jaffa as a literal as well as metaphoric extension of their personal, oppressed lives.

Levi asked the three performers to improvise while combing each other's hair and plaiting braids. This simple and daily performativity enabled them to bring up additional slivers of material, which, together with the pieces that had already accumulated during the creative process, eventually consolidated into a thin mini-play of three short scenes. Although the three mothers spoke Hebrew quite fluently, it was clear to Levi that they should perform in their own language. Since there was no budget for 'a real production', she proposed that the sand box in the play yard be the stage, as a metonym and metaphor for the sea.³²

The 'Thin' Performance

The performance took place in daylight, and included simple, ready-made props: a diary, a hijab, tea towels, and a baby carriage. In such a way, the thin performance was generated as a female version of Grotowski's 'poor theatre', negating any sign of affluence so as to focus on the performers and their relationship with the audience.³³

The first scene restored the happy adolescence of the three mothers, as they recalled it. Dina, Ria, and Nana enter the sand box with tea towels, accompanied by the music of Farid El Atrash. 'Such fun that the long school vacation is here, we can go to the beach to look for good-looking guys,' they say excitedly to each other.³⁴ Dina reads Ria's diary and finds that she has met a nice boy, and she and Nana draw Ria into telling them the story in detail.

Here, the dividing principle of feminine morphology was adopted in subversive

intensity, offering the love story from three different perspectives: the first was Dina's, the engaged and practical girl; the second, that of Nana, the provocative, rebellious girl; and the third, that of Ria, the romantic girl. The ideal story of a chance meeting in a queue at the bank and a romantic trip to the sea, where the protagonists hold hands and whisper words of love at sunset, is disrupted repeatedly by the three characters, who are split, interchanging their viewpoints.

In doing this, the performers created a multi-vocal echo of possible viewpoints while at the same time protecting themselves from being identified by the audience as having one clear viewpoint, which could have had negative repercussions for them after the performance. By dismantling the romantic story, the performers were able to deliver a subversive message regarding their ongoing oppressive experience in which even a walk by the sea – a tiny and thin articulation of freedom as perceived by women such as myself – remains an unfulfilled fantasy of the Palestinian mothers:

DINA: It is not you, Ria, who looks for your man.

It is the man who always finds the woman. . . .

NANA: What will you do in the village? A woman does not go out from her home.

DINA: She wants him! But what does it matter what she wants; it is he who will decide about her!

NANA: Why? Who is he that he will decide about you? Love him, but talk to him. You have to tell him what you want, not only to listen to him and follow him. . . .

NANA: What will people say if I suddenly put on a hijab? (*Covers herself with a hijab.*)

DINA: They will say good luck. It suits you. You are a good girl.

RIA: Why have you done this? The police will stop you. Check you, as if you are a terrorist.

DINA: OK, I'll take it off.

NANA: No, Allah will punish you. What happened to her? She got corrupted. . . .

DINA: I'm fed up of taking care of my brothers. When will I get married, move to my own home, be alone, put on music, dance and sing for myself, and, in the evening, we'll go to the sea.

NANA: What sea! You'll do in your husband's home exactly what you are doing now in your father's home. You'll clean, cook, change diapers, wash bottles, from bad to worse.³⁵

In the second scene in the sand box, the friends meet again after a few years, all of them pregnant, each rocking a baby carriage. Their happiness at meeting each other in the street by chance reflects what they had recounted during the creative process about being alone, forbidden to keep their former relationships with their friends after marriage. In this second, coincidental, meeting the young mothers find out that each already has two children, that they have stopped studying, none of them is working, and even Nana, the provocative, handsome girl who rode her bike, read books, and declared that she would be free and different, could not escape the circle of oppression.

'I thought I would see you on TV as a political activist or so,' says Dina; and Nana, who looks even more unhappy and untidy than her friends, keeps silent, leaving the sand box defeated.³⁶

The Apotheosis

The third scene, breaking the line of narrative, structure, and style, is a monologue by Nana in which she discloses what she could not say previously to her friends, and cannot in any way articulate in her real life. Nana appropriates the legitimacy granted to her by the theatre in order to expose her inner, silent thoughts through the subversive frame of play. As Gregory Bateson asserted, playing is always paradoxical, untrue and true at the same time.³⁷ The performer puts on the mask of theatrical playing in order to remove the oppressive social masks from her face as well as from the faces of people in the audience.

Performing the monologue in front of the audience was an alternative gender performativity in that it deviated from the gender performativity that the performer was used to reiterating in her daily life. In the poetic text of the monologue, the thin feminine morphology articulated the sea and sand as a hybrid image – divided and united, verbal and staged, feminine and masculine, fantastic and real, solid and fluid, liberating and oppressing – as it charts the mental, silent map of the young mothers from Jaffa:

At last I also married. And today, I have three kids – almost, with God's blessing. After my marriage everybody thought that I would be pregnant immediately. But it didn't happen. . . . probably I didn't want it. . . . It was difficult for me to separate from myself. I knew, the moment I got pregnant, I would not be myself any more. But when I got pregnant I wanted it so much. I wanted a kid who would remind me that it was still possible to dream. I wanted to look into his eyes and see my sea. But then it became like a giant wave that washed me away. I started choking. I have not been able to see the sand. It has been eight years since I first swam. It is difficult. It is hard to breathe. . . . I'm searching myself, searching for something of myself. Maybe these hands? No, they do not belong to me but to the beans that I peel, to the vegetables that I wash, to the pots that I scrub. The feet? They are not mine, either. They belong to the streets of Jaffa, to the floors of the bank, the Ministry of the Interior, and the medical clinic. . . . Sometimes, at night, when I go up to the roof to take down the laundry, I look at the dark sea. I close my eyes. I recall my sea and then I become one per cent of what should have been myself.³⁸

This monologue, the apotheosis of the performance, poignantly indicated the daily, harsh, existential experience of these three young Palestinian women, who live in the mixed town of Jaffa.

A Release of Creative Energies

This study of *The Bride from the Sea* clarifies why and how the thin public performance was generated out of a mixture of obstructions and constraints, and against all odds. The raw, thin performativity was, in the circumstances, not only the single possible choice that could have been poached but also the appropriate, poetic and political choice by which to articulate the complex lives of these women who live on the borderline.

Peter Brook, who never referred directly to community-based theatre, reflected, nevertheless, on popular theatre, the wider framework in which community-based theatre belongs.³⁹ Brook described popular theatre as a 'rough theatre' that affects people precisely through its roughness. This roughness stems from its closeness to the ordinary, poor, and marginalized people who create theatre out of their own rough life conditions,

appropriating anything available in order to articulate themselves artistically and politically. *The Bride from the Sea* thus demonstrated a thin performativity on the borderline, made through a rough women's performance and out of the rough conditions of the tiny borderline of the kindergarten within the larger borderline of Jaffa.

The performance was received enthusiastically by the whole, heterogeneous audience: family members of the three Palestinian women, especially the women's relatives, the husband of one of the performers, who had initially objected to her participation but eventually attended the event, the mixed staff of the kindergarten, and students from Tel Aviv University. Levi received many text messages from the performers telling her how high-spirited they had felt after the event, and that they had received attention and appreciation for the first time in their lives. One wrote: 'I fly like a butterfly,' and another added: 'My mother said that she couldn't believe that I would be able to accomplish such a thing. She confessed that she herself had wanted to be an actress, but was forced to give it up.'⁴⁰

Jill Dolan contends in her *Utopian Performance* that theatre and performance offer people a space for a collaborative and creative encounter to imagine a better future, and thus to experience a moment of hope.⁴¹ The excited response to the performance of *The Bride from the Sea* indicated that it had managed to have a utopian effect, if only temporarily. Dolan does not refer to a simplistic representation of an impossible utopian future, but, rather, suggests that performance is an ethical, social, and aesthetic frame that can encourage people to invest creative energies in identifying those singular performativities that initiate hope for a better future.

Community-based theatre is usually a local, political act that emerges from the interface between the real and the symbolic, and thus always scratches the surface of given reality, sealing within it an actual and tangible trace. The concrete, staged realization of desired change produces the hope that the subversive staged action might leak

into the social sphere, as well. The coming into being of *The Bride from the Sea*, against all odds, was thus a utopian rough performativity, stimulating the hope that things in the future might be different. Perhaps this may only be a very small difference, but small differences, as Homi Bhabha says, are often the most important foundations in the process of change.⁴²

The temptation to end the research journey here was strong; however, such a closure seemed somehow too optimistic. The sense that the empowering effect of the theatre project might soon evaporate, and that these women would return to their harsh daily routine, challenged the possibility of a happy ending. These women did not represent all the Palestinian women in Israel, or even in Jaffa. Nevertheless, their particular voices should be heard. Did the rough theatre offer the right words with which to speak *The Bride from the Sea*? Was there anything else? Something that was relevant also for me, the privileged Jewish author of this article?

Bare Theatre and Poaching Poetics

Judith Butler suggests that the subversive potential is embedded in disturbing texts that produce insecurity and anxiety.⁴³ Therefore it is precisely when we encounter such a text, which shakes the ground beneath our feet, that it is worth searching further for the still invisible subversive grain. It is at this point that Giorgio's Agamben's notion of 'bare life' might drive the search further.⁴⁴

Bare life, as Agamben asserts, occurs when the sovereign abandons individuals or groups for the sake of protecting its citizens in states of exception (emergency). This entails a particular liminal existence in which certain individuals or groups are included in the society in the form of exclusion and in the form of unrestricted exposure to violation, authorized by the law.

Such a situation is possible, since it is the sovereign who possesses the power to decide on the state of exception, which both validates and suspends the operation of the law. Such power to decide on the state of exception in order to restore the social order,

even violently, is dangerous, since the sovereign might convert the exceptional into the normative. Bare life thus means an abandoned existence of actual danger and symbolic exclusion that becomes normative and thus acceptable. Agamben indeed focuses on the authoritative apparatuses of abandonment and not on the abandoned persons themselves and their experiences.

The Bride from the Sea is such a performance that draws the attention to instances in which the border between normative life and bare life is fluid, obscure, and ambiguous. Precisely in hidden places within the dominant culture, instances of bare life may flicker without notice. When powerless people live at the intersection of a number of oppressive apparatuses, each apparatus abandons, abuses, or oppresses those people with the claim of protecting the security of all the others.

Thus, bare life is the expression that most properly describes the lives of these young Palestinian women, who are doubly abandoned – both by their ethnic internal and national external sovereign entities. The tension between these two apparatuses, operating in the twilight area of Jaffa and against the background of the complex political Israeli-Palestinian conflict, harms these women. They are fated not only to a double abandonment but also to a transparent abandonment, while the two sovereign apparatuses reinforce one another out of their own particular interests.

Those who live a bare life, as the Palestinian mothers demonstrated, can express themselves only minimally through bare articulation. Thus *The Bride from the Sea* is more than just a female local version of rough theatre. It is a distinct form of women-based community theatre that articulates bare life through the poaching poetics of thin, basic, concentrated, and stripped performativity. *The Bride from the Sea* was a bare theatre performance that presented a metaphor as well as a metonym of bare lives – the abandoned lives of the young mothers from Jaffa.

Throughout the entire project, from the first encounter until the public performance, these young Palestinian mothers articulated

their resistance to the regimes oppressing them, external and internal. The present analysis of the project has revealed that their gender oppression is more intensive than the national oppression. It was the gender component that enabled the bond between the Palestinian women, the Jewish facilitator, and the mixed staff. Our shared gender connected me, too, to the Palestinian women; but, had I not attended the performance, I would not have taken the journey towards them, a journey that has left me with numbers of questions and with a performance that still haunts me.

Not far away from my home, the lives of young Palestinian women are being abandoned, supposedly for my protection – our protection. And life goes on. But what if, due to the constant political conflict here, the state of exception becomes normative? Could it happen that one day my own life, too, will be abandoned for the sake of security?

Notes and References

1. Recently, most Israeli Arabs identify themselves as Israeli-Palestinians. Hereafter, Palestinians.
2. The facilitator and director was Anat Levi, a third-year student, who was supervised by Hanna Vazana-Grinvald, an MFA student, and Rimona Lapin, the project co-ordinator. The performers were three young Palestinian women: Raida Abu-Halifa, Nawal Shattat, and Dunia Biari. At that time, I was the head of the community-based studies programme, and it is in this position that I arrived to take part in the celebratory event.
3. William J. T. Mitchell, 'Translator Translated: Interview with Cultural Theorist Homi Bhabha', *Artforum*, XXXI, No. 7 (1995), p. 82.
4. Mia Hod in an interview with the author, 3 May 2009.
5. Dan Rabinowitz, 'The Palestinian Citizens of Israel, the Concept of Trapped Minority, and the Discourse of Transnationalism in Anthropology', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, XXIV, No. 1 (2001), p. 64–85.
6. Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir, *Being Israeli: the Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2005), in Hebrew.
7. Hanna Herzog, "'Both an Arab and a Woman': Gendered Racialized Experience of Female Palestinian Citizens of Israel', *Social Identities*, X (2004), p. 53–82.
8. Mia Hod, in interview, op. cit.
9. Dan Rabinowitz and Daniel Monterescu, 'Introduction', in Rabinowitz and Monterescu, ed., *Mixed Towns, Trapped Communities: Historical Narratives, Spatial Dynamics, Gender Relations, and Cultural Encounters in Ethnically Mixed Towns in Israel/Palestine* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), p. 3.
10. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002).

11. Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, 'Whose Play Is It? The Issue of Authorship/Ownership in Israeli Community-Based Theatre', *The Drama Review*, XLVIII, No. 3 (2004), p. 117–34; Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, 'The Israeli National Community Theatre Festival: the Real and the Imagined', *Theatre Research International*, XX, No. 3 (2005), p. 284–95; Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, 'Remembering Forbidden Memories: Community Theatre and the Politics of Memory', *Social Identities*, XII, No. 3 (2006), p. 269–83; Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, *Theatre in Co-Communities: Articulating Power* (London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
12. Anat Levi, in interview with the author, 30 October 2008.
13. Ibid.
14. From Levi's notebook.
15. Ibid.
16. Anat Levi, in interview with the author, 9 June, 2009.
17. Ibid.
18. From Levi's notebook.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in Sue-Ellen Case, ed., *Performing Feminism: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 270–83.
23. From Levi's notebook.
24. Anat Levi, in interview with the author, 9 June, 2009.
25. From Levi's notebook.
26. *The Bride from the Sea*, n.p. Translations are mine.
27. Ibid.
28. Sue Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1988); Helen Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre* (New York: Macmillan, 1984); Jane de Gay and Lizbeth Goodman, ed., *Languages of Theatre Shaped by Women* (Portland: Intellect Books, 2003).
29. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 174.
30. *The Bride from the Sea*.
31. Ibid.
32. Anat Levi, in interview with the author, 9 June 2009.
33. Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1968).
34. *The Bride from the Sea*.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Gregory Bateson, 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy', in Richard Schechner and Mady Schuman, ed., *Ritual, Play, and Performance* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).
38. *The Bride of the Sea*.
39. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).
40. From Levi's notebook.
41. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
42. Mitchell, 'Translator Translated', op. cit.
43. Peter Osborn and Lynn Segal, 'Gender as Performance: an Interview with Judith Butler', *Radical Philosophy*, LXVII (1994), p. 32–9.
44. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998).