

## Debating Natalism: Israeli One-Woman Shows on Experiencing Childlessness

Natalism constitutes one of the main values of Israeli society, to the extent that the state's explicit policy is to encourage and heavily finance childbearing. Whatever the reasons for this pronatalist ideology may be – religious, cultural, or politico-demographic – the fact is that, in twenty-first century Israel, motherhood is still considered a biological imperative; and a Jewish-Israeli woman's reproductive body is implicitly mobilized for national needs. Against the backdrop of this persistent pro-birth agenda, in this study Dror Harari and Gillit Kroul discuss a noteworthy number of recently staged one-woman shows that critically debate the Israeli 'fertility religion' and the physical and emotional distress that it causes for the infertile and childfree woman. These autobiographical performances of infertility are seen as a sub-genre of Israeli critical disability performance, in that they manifest the idea that what defines the infertile as disabled is not (only) the woman's biological deficiency but, rather, her inability to fulfil her national gendered role. Dror Harari is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Theatre Arts, Tel Aviv University. His *Self-Performance: Performance Art and the Representation of Self* was published in Hebrew by Resling Publications (2014), and his current research, funded by the Israel Science Foundation, focuses on the historiography of performance art in Israel from its origins in the 1960s and through the 1970s. Gillit Kroul has an MA in Theatre Studies from Tel Aviv University. Her book of poetry *When the Sea Seeds its Hopes* is published by Sa'ar Publications, and her short semi-autobiographical play in Hebrew *Shnayim (Two)*, based on her experience of fertility treatment, is available at <<http://pregbirthanthology.wixsite.com/anthology>>.

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THE FINAL, melodramatically formulated scene of Moshe Shamir's canonic Israeli play *Hu Halach Ba'Sadot (He Walked through the Fields, 1948)* depicts Mika, a young Shoah (Holocaust) survivor, who is in the process of becoming a kibbutz member, leaning against a post at the bus stop and weeping.<sup>1</sup> The sound of a bus driving away is heard in the background. Mika, supposed to have got on the bus to the nearby town in order to undergo an abortion procedure, has decided to keep the child.

At that moment Willie, her mentor and father of her boyfriend Uri runs in, thinking that Mika is on the departing bus. When he turns around and sees her, she bursts into an excited and fragmented monologue about her sudden decision not to leave but to stay with Uri (the native-born Israeli) in the kibbutz and bring up the child happily together, not knowing that Willie has run after her in order to inform her of Uri's tragic

death in a military operation just the night before.

*He Walked through the Fields* premiered on 31 May 1948, only two weeks after the Israeli Declaration of Independence (14 May 1948) and while many young Israeli men and women were participating in the battles of the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. Given the historical context and the social mood filled with both fear and hope, the dividing line between reality and fiction blurred,<sup>2</sup> turning the play into a formative event of historical significance that contributed to the consolidation of an 'imagined community'.<sup>3</sup>

While the issue of reproduction is a minor one in the play, mainly introduced to enhance the dramatic tension and heighten its effect, it does tell us about what was to be expected of the Israeli woman. Mika's future child symbolizes the first-born of an independent Israel: a living monument to his dead father and to Mika's family that has perished

in the Shoah. Her decision not to abort can be understood as an acknowledgment of her role as a Jewish-Israeli woman who becomes a mother not only to her baby yet unborn but also to the new nation just recently born.

Natalism is firmly embedded in the Israeli collective consciousness and is central to the formation of the Israeli subject's identity (female and male alike), world view, and life course. As recent socio-historical studies have clearly shown, pronatalism is still very much an expressed policy of contemporary Israel, as it was in pre-state Israel and in the formative years of the nation. Israeli sociologist Larissa Remennick, for example, observes that 'Israeli society is family-oriented and strongly pronatalist, at both institutional and normative/individual levels.'<sup>4</sup>

Against this particular socio-cultural atmosphere, which regards motherhood as imperative and strongly supports natalism, we can discern in recent years the emergence of one-woman shows, grounded in autobiographical material, that deal with infertile and/or childfree women who must contend with the social expectations and consequent stigma. These works engage in a critical discourse that debates the social and institutional formation of docile gendered bodies, particularly with respect to pronatalistic social demands, and the marking of the infertile, as well as the childfree, as unworthy and disabled.

While infertility is a physical impairment with no visible attributes, its stigmatization in Israel can be said to be internalized and socially experienced as a disability by women from a certain age. In this respect, and given the role that pronatalism plays in the construction of a competent and productive Israeli (bodily) identity – what Israeli anthropologist Meira Weiss has termed the 'chosen body'<sup>5</sup> – we consider these one-woman shows engaging with infertility under the category of disability performance, since they dismantle the medical-individual discursive model of infertility and disclose its cultural and social construction.<sup>6</sup>

These autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works enable their creators to break out of the confines of the IVF wards

that subject infertile women not only to the medical power-knowledge structure and its gaze but also to national and economic interests. The works reveal the naturalized association between imperative motherhood and national mobilization of the womb in the service of Israel's grand existential narratives: the survival of the Jewish-Israeli people and the continuous collective task of nation-building.

### Theatrical Infertility

The issue of fertility and pronatalism in Israeli society reveals a charged reality and introduces a personal and public consideration of essential questions of identity, ethics, and society. In June 2010, the Israeli Minister of Health appointed an ad hoc public committee to re-examine the status of fertility treatments and surrogacy in Israel prior to passing a series of laws on fertility and childbirth.<sup>7</sup> An introduction to the committee's recommendations, which the Ministry of Health published in May 2012, included the following:

The subject of fertility and birth in Israel is of tremendous social and cultural importance. The most obvious expression of this is that Israel is a world leader in the rate of fertility treatments per person. There are several cultural and religious factors that affect the State's approach to such treatments as supporter and funder to an unprecedented extent, and the fact that fertility is one of the central values of our society.<sup>8</sup>

Given that 'fertility is one of the central values' of Israeli society, one would expect to find its echoes in theatre as well. Yet during the years in which Israel's fertility industry came into being and flourished (from the 1980s to the present), not a single play concerning the subject has appeared on the established repertory theatre stage in Israel. A review of Israeli plays performed on such stages shows that very few have touched, usually indirectly or peripherally, on the issue of childlessness or on pronatalism.<sup>9</sup>

The silence of the Israeli theatre makes one wonder and, perhaps more importantly, reflects the internalization of the pronatalist policy by the Israeli subject, who takes it as

an obvious matter of fact. This naturalization of pronatalism and the obsession with it in Israel has reached a certain peak in the 2010s, with several prime-time reality TV shows, such as *Baby Boom* (its first season out of four aired in 2013) and *Nine Months* (its first season of two aired in 2014), which followed couples through the process of pregnancy.<sup>10</sup>

The promo for *Nine Months* was voiced over with the following text:

Call it the commandment to procreate or something in the Israeli DNA or pressuring parents, but the moment that defines the identity of millions of Israelis is that of producing a child. . . . For the first time [on Israeli television], we invited a hundred couples – younger and older, married, single parents, and single-sex – and asked them to perform the biggest pregnancy test in Israel [on television].<sup>11</sup>

Performing this intimate moment of reading the results of the pregnancy test in public turned it, inevitably, into a dramatized contest of sorts, dividing the participants into those who had ‘succeeded’ not only to fertilize but ultimately to accomplish their Israeliness by actuating and expressing their inborn ‘national’ genetic code, and those who had ‘failed’ to do so.

Against the backdrop of this prime-time pro-birth media boom, we can discern in the last few years an increasing number of one-woman shows rooted in independent, mostly female, writing, and engaging with the struggles, uncertainties, and dilemmas of involuntary and voluntary childlessness. While we want to point here at a distinctive and still growing phenomenon with observable shared characteristics, we will refer here to only a few examples.

### Monodramas on the Fertility Issue

*IV Ken or IV Lo – Tik Poriut (IV Yes or IV No – Fertility Record)* was first staged in July 2012 as a guest play at the *Masraheed* monodrama festival at the Akko Theatre Centre.<sup>12</sup> After the festival, the play was performed at Amir Orian’s Room Theatre, and since then it has been presented mainly as a private production for medical teams in fertility wards and

for mental-health workers who support women fertility patients.<sup>13</sup>

With generous portions of black humour that manages concomitantly to amuse, move, and make one shudder, Liat Hayim, the fictional double of the writer-performer Iris Harpaz, tells about her repeated attempts to conceive and give birth despite her age, nagging doubts, and dysfunctional reproductive system. Despair drives her to a support group where she reveals her story. The dramaturgical concept of this play places the spectators in the role of the support group members. Liat describes the inner voices of a woman who needs fertility treatments and sheds light on the castrating power relations she experiences during treatment that erase her femininity, trample her self-esteem, turn her body into an object, and reduce it to the status of a medical protocol.

*Em Hasahna (Mother of the Year)* was produced in 2012 at the fringe centre of the Tzavta Theatre in Tel Aviv, running there for two years, and is currently in the Salon Theatre repertory as an independent production.<sup>14</sup> The play presents Tehila Fleischer, who is taking the train to an important presentation for her work. She suddenly discovers that she has become pregnant spontaneously after years of fertility treatments, as a result of which she had conceived some years before and already has a little daughter. She reviews her various relationships with her partner, her mother, her physician, and her girlfriends, who are at different stages in their lives, and enables the audience to confront the less glamorous reality of fertility treatments, pregnancy, birthing, parenting, and being a couple.

*Ha’Beitzit Ha’Tova Sheli (My Best Ovum)* is a short play that was first performed at the Short Play Festival in the Tzavta Theatre in November 2015.<sup>15</sup> The protagonist, 42-year-old Tamar, decides to have a child. An innocent appointment with her gynaecologist confronts her with the biological reality of her ‘aging’ body. Like Limor Ginsburg, the playwright, who based the text on her own experience, Tamar too decides not to wait for the ideal partner and meets men explicitly in order to conceive. The initial failed attempts



The false pregnancy test. Shira Nathan as Chani in *Two Lines*. Photo: Gerard Alon.

then end happily when Tamar gives birth to a daughter.

*Poriya (Fertile)* is based on the shared stories and experiences of Yakir Eliyahu Vaknin, the playwright and director, who, as a gay man, considers himself 'socially infertile'<sup>16</sup> and Zohar Meidan, the performer, who, like the protagonist of the play, Poriya Michaeli, was born without a uterus due to a genetic disorder.<sup>17</sup> *Fertile* was first performed in June 2015 as part of Centre Stage, Jerusalem's monodrama festival hosted by the Israel Festival. Avoiding commitment to a new romantic relationship because of her impairment, Poriya recalls her childhood and adolescent memories from the moment of discovering her 'flaw'. She carries out a reckoning with her mother, who had raised her to keep silent and not mention it to her friends, as well as with her counsellor in the youth movement, the boys, and the doctors.

Throughout the play she deals with the issue of her identity as a woman lacking reproductive organs in a society where everything leads to the aspired moment of childbirth. Only when she realizes that she herself is perfectly fine and it is the society around her that sees her as 'flawed' does she dare open up to her persistent suitor and give him a chance.

*Shnei Kavim (Two Lines)* was first staged at the 2016 *Teatronetto* monodrama festival.<sup>18</sup> Chani takes a pregnancy test in the bathroom: she sits on the toilet bowl, legs apart, her underpants down, and tells the story of her life and how that had made her decide she was not interested in becoming pregnant and raising children. As a religious woman, because she takes contraceptive pills she has to lie to her husband, Elki, to whom she has been married for five years.

Her family members, work colleagues, and even pupils, never fail to stare daily at her persistently flat abdomen. Only Stas, the Russian security guard at the school where she works, who had been a gynaecologist in Russia before emigrating to Israel, shows any empathy and becomes her confidant, helping her when she resolves to end the unwanted pregnancy without her husband's knowledge. Now she faces another milestone as she awaits the results of an additional test.

### A Shared Political Agenda

*Two Lines* is an autobiographical play based on the dilemmas experienced by the playwright and his wife. Unlike the other plays under discussion, it deals specifically with voluntary childlessness. However, it is grouped here together with works that engage in the discourse of infertility not only because in too many cases fertility treatment is unsuccessful (and the woman remains childless, even if involuntarily), but also because of a shared political agenda.

Three main characteristics are common to these one-woman shows: a female majority among their creative teams; the presence of at least one creator – playwright, director, or performer – who has undergone fertility

treatment herself, is childless, or has become a mother late in life (in Israeli terms); and the fact that these productions are performed in small intimate venues of the fringe scene.

In the local social context, this exposed theatrical treatment of childlessness places the issue along the axis of the various relations between the private and the collective, involving individual will versus social demands; the failing body of the infertile versus the ritual of the functional body that fulfils its national duties; *my* body versus its possession and clinical administration which turns it into a medical protocol; and, most important in this respect, the positioning of the minor narrative, which is unheroic and concerns the anonymous infertile and childless, against the dominant national pro-birth meta-narrative.

Here we will seek to show that such performances reflect the need of a particular community, which maintains a supportive and informative internal discourse, for immediate exposure of the relationship between women and their bodies, society, and the state.<sup>19</sup> In other words, these performances should be seen as a political-performative act of a 'coming out' that validates silenced and disabled subjectivity and triggers a critical social discourse on the genderization and nationalization of the body, the 'fertility religion', and parenting in a state that considers natalism as an ongoing national recruitment order.

The writer of *Mother of the Year*, Dorit Prumer-Barzilai, says:

The audience and the public have matured and so the subject [of infertility and childlessness] is brought up. . . . There is not one home where this is not an issue. My sister-in-law, my friends, girls with whom I have worked. It cannot be concealed because it means showing up late to work, lying in bed at home. It can no longer be hidden. It used to be silenced because people would be ashamed of it, and this is no longer so. It's done and that's that.<sup>20</sup>

Irit Benedek, the performer of that play, adds: 'We see outing as a mission. . . . It is important because there is a conspiracy of shame, ignorance, and loneliness, and that is why I felt a need to expose our story.'<sup>21</sup>

## From Jewish-Zionist Pro-natalism to Post-Zionist Post-natalism

In *He Walked through the Fields* of 1948, Mika eventually subordinates her will and reproductive body to the Zionist-national task of nation-building. Her resolve to keep the baby is effectively her rite of passage into Israeli society. By making this decision, she consents to leave behind her diasporic European mentality and is metaphorically reborn; and so too is the nation.

Zionism, as a utopian national movement emerging in Europe in the late nineteenth century, not only aspired to obtain territory and return to the ancient, imagined 'homeland' where the scattered Jews would gather and fulfil their national rights, but also, and necessarily, it aspired to create the 'New Jew'.<sup>22</sup> Historian Anita Shapira contends that the Zionist leadership believed that:

the existing generation is a 'desert generation' of sorts, devoid of the mental and physical prowess needed for a grand colonization project: only 'its sons' would build the land.<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, the mobilization of mothers was vital to the Zionist revival project, since it was they who bore the responsibility of creating and educating a new generation of the New Jew in the Land of Israel.<sup>24</sup>

In the spirit of the utopian-revolutionary ideas of nineteenth-century Europe, Zionism – calling for the birth of a new, secular, healthy and modern Jew, who would bear the burden of the national revolution – combined two reproduction regimes: pronatalism and eugenics.<sup>25</sup> While the first assured quantity (crucial in view of the small Jewish population in Palestine in the early twentieth century compared to the Palestinian-Arab population), the second promised quality (suiting modern-national models).

In an essay analyzing the writings of gynaecologist Dr Miriam Aharonova, who immigrated to Palestine in 1929, Sachlav Stoler-Liss and Shifra Schwartz found that:

Aharonova disseminated unequivocal pronatalist and eugenic ideas that were conventional for the medical discourse of the local Jewish community at the time. Women were required to have at least three children and avoid abortions.<sup>26</sup>

In another essay on the formation of Israel's fertility policy in 1956–1966 (that is, during the two decades that followed the founding of the State), Shoham Melamed and Yehuda Shenhav identify two discursive frameworks that shaped the politics of 'Jewish pronatalism': an historical discourse that places natalism within the context of two main narratives – the Shoah and the Jewish-Arab conflict (hence the need to ensure a Jewish majority within the borders of Israel); and the national-ideological discourse, whose main fulcrums are Zionism as a modern national movement, the Jewish religion with its demand to procreate, and a patriarchal family ideology.

The inevitable ramification of such a policy is that of locating women in the social sphere as 'national wombs', valuing them according to their 'national contribution' to the growth of the Jewish population.<sup>27</sup> These narratives continue to validate the pro-birth position in Israel to the present day, as one can learn from a member of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament), Zehava Gal-On, who declared in a statement at a meeting of the Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality of the fifteenth Knesset:

One can speak sweetly about everything and make softened written formulations but, at the end of the day, here is an ideologically disguised invasion of the bedroom. I respect any woman who wishes to have as many children as possible as long as this is her personal choice. . . . You mobilize women for procreation to answer national, ethnic, racist, and ethno-centric needs, and you exert social pressure on women.<sup>28</sup>

### 'Mobilizing' Women for Procreation

The national prescription that 'mobilizes women for procreation' is present in these one-woman shows in various forms through allusions to the Shoah and the parodic use of army slang – two of the validating discourses of Israeli pronatalism. In *Mother of the Year*, for instance, there are no less than seven textual references to the Holocaust, or Shoah. This is in addition to the fact that the play takes place in a railway carriage, duplicated by the effect of *mise-en-abîme* through a

moving toy train that appears both at the beginning and the end of the show.

The connotation for the local audience is obvious, as is the subtextual critique: in Israel, for better or for worse, one cannot afford to abandon the cultural asset of the 'Shoah train', and the birth of Israeli children is encouraged so as to ensure that the Shoah will never be repeated. In *IV Yes or IV No*, protagonist Liat Hayim is consoled by the possibility that her daughter will have brown hair from birth, since there is no longer any need to hide from the Nazis and be born blonde.<sup>29</sup>

Israeli army culture and its language are also present in these productions. For example, the atmosphere of a military operation and the race against the biological clock in *My Best Ovum* or *Mother of the Year* each has a sequence written as a series of military commands: 'panties down, flag up, eggs out, semen in, mix and plant'.<sup>30</sup> The IVF laboratory scene in *IV Yes or IV No* is represented as a military operation in the communication system and refers to the sperm cells of the protagonist's partner as a unit of soldiers on parade. Thus:

Sperm at ease, sperm at attention, at ease; ejaculation per cent, movement volume, morphology, improvement. Forward march: left right left, left right left, mark time!<sup>31</sup>

These intertextual references to the Shoah and to the IDF cultural slang are parodic as they both 'incorporate and challenge' the Jewish-Zionist-Israeli grand narratives (drawing on Linda Hutcheon's famous formulation of the postmodern parodic function).<sup>32</sup> They expose their constructive nature and criticize their regulatory power over body-subjects, while simultaneously employing them in order to touch a sensitive nerve shared by Israeli spectators. A clear example of this complex relationship to the pronatalist imperative specific to the Israeli situation is Tehila Fleischer's reckoning in *Mother of the Year*:

One child is for validating your normality and making sure your pipes work, no more. The second – to make sure your first child keeps busy

and does not become standoffish. Between us, you need a third one, too – if your eldest is killed in a war, we are after all in the Middle East, right? Then you won't be left with just one.<sup>33</sup>

The tight interweaving of the personal and the national in these plays demonstrates that, in the Israeli context, the emergence of women's performative work dealing openly with the question of fertility and birth is not limited to the critical realm of gender politics. Rather, these personal and social ramifications should be further linked to what we identify as a post-Zionist critique, which questions the Zionist-national ideological structures, including explicit and implicit eugenic pronatalism.

Within the inclusive post-Zionist theoretical framework, Israeli critical sociologist Uri Ram discerns a postmodern approach that aims at uncovering Zionism's oppressive discourse.<sup>34</sup> This approach contests the single, unifying meta-narrative of the proper Zionist subjectivity: male,<sup>35</sup> white-European,<sup>36</sup> heterosexual,<sup>37</sup> young, healthy, and fertile.<sup>38</sup> Against this privileged fictitious identity, postmodern post-Zionism constitutes a critical position that uncovers the minor narratives of disadvantaged subjectivities. Seen in this way, the performance of infertility constitutes a sub-genre of the critical Israeli disability performance that deconstructs the ideal of the perfect Zionist-Israeli body-subject.<sup>39</sup>

### Infertile Body: Un-Chosen and Disabled

The subtitle of the monodrama *Poriya* (*Fertile*) is *A Damaged One Stops Hiding*, and the protagonist's self-definition as 'damaged' is reiterated several times throughout the play. Thus does Liat Haim conceive of herself as a 'failure' in *IV Yes IV No* after yet another failed attempt to keep her pregnancy, following embryo transfer:

I'm sorry, my little lump. I'm sorry that I was unable to keep you in my womb. I tried to be a mother like everyone else, to fulfil the dream that everyone wanted me to wish for: a home, a family, and children. I'm a failure, my little lump, I'm a failure!<sup>40</sup>

The conception of self as imperfect and disabled is shared by the female protagonist in all these one-woman shows.

Sociological research exploring how pronatalist societies consider childlessness and how infertile women in such societies perceive and manage the disclosure and stigmatization of their identity shows that 'because motherhood is almost synonymous with femininity, childless women are deprived of the most central element of their gender identity and, hence, personal integrity'.<sup>41</sup>

Elizabeth Sternke and Kathleen Abrahamson note that (American) women internalize social gender norms and expectations 'that women must bear children in order to be fully feminine, to be complete women'.<sup>42</sup> This naturalized myth of feminine achievement is intriguingly linked to nationalist gender norms, as one can learn from the electoral campaign in 2016 for the British Prime Minister, during which Andrea Leadsom (who is a mother of three), denigrated her rival, Theresa May (who is childless), suggesting that 'having children meant she [Leadsom] had "a very real stake" in Britain's future'.<sup>43</sup>

In Israel, this kind of naturalized gendered demand, linking 'women's reproductive bodies and the constraints of inhabiting a woman's reproductive body' is integrated into its grand narratives which perceive motherhood as a national task.<sup>44</sup> Thus, for instance, Irit Benedek, who plays Tehila in *Mother of the Year*, and who herself underwent eighteen fertility treatments (until she and her husband decided to pursue surrogacy), stated in an interview: 'There is an immense social pressure in Israel to produce children. . . . It is sick. Women who cannot get pregnant easily feel that they are a failure, not living up to social expectations.'<sup>45</sup>

In her book *The Chosen Body: the Politics of the Body in Israeli Society*, Israeli anthropologist Meira Weiss examines how Israeli social paradigms are articulated through the body, focusing on the discursive formation of body perfectionism and deconstructing Zionist-Israeli ableist ideologies that fabricate the ideal of 'the chosen body' (fit for

the national revival of the 'chosen people'. Weiss probes the relationship between the 'chosen body' and the regulatory and standardizing social regimes that seek to mould it from the moment of birth – and even prior to this moment, with the many tests conducted to guarantee the safe delivery of a healthy child – to the moment of death (whether natural or heroic in battle).

Weiss does not discuss infertility *per se*, but she considers parenting and, specifically, motherhood as a social axiom. 'Women,' she writes, 'were defined, following 1948 [after Israel attained statehood] as responsible for bearing as many children as possible "for the glory of the nation"'.<sup>46</sup> The chosen body, as a discursive formation of the new, masculine, muscular, modern European Jew (the anti-thesis and antidote of the old, feminine, weak diasporic Jew), relegates women to their traditional biological role as bearers of perfect children. It follows that, within this discursive atmosphere of imaging bodies perfectly formed to realize their collective national tasks – 'productivity, physical labour, self-defence, and security'<sup>47</sup> – the inability to give birth and fulfil this national mission is considered a flaw, a disability.

Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern claims that child-bearing was considered by women at the time of the Zionist immigrations to Palestine as a pioneering, even heroic, act, equivalent to the masculine task of defending the homeland, whereas infertility and childlessness were considered damaging to the collective national enterprise.<sup>48</sup>

Considering the performance of infertility as a sub-genre of the Israeli critical disability performance means that it seeks not only to expose and criticize the naturalized link between femininity and (biological) motherhood, but also between motherhood and good, productive, contributive citizenship. These plays engage specifically with how Israeli social beliefs and values disable infertile and childfree women who occupy 'unchosen' bodies.

As Tehila in *Mother of the Year* says: 'Next to "already parents", you always feel that you are a mistake. They are "the correct" and you are a flop.'<sup>49</sup> What defines these women

protagonists as disabled is not (only) their biological deficiency, but rather their inability to fulfil their national gendered role and 'responsibility'. Failing to accomplish their imperative national duty of bearing children, infertile women are considered incompetent and their self-integrity is questioned.

### The Uncomfortable Gestus of Legs Spread

NURSE: Number 118?

LIAT: Yes. . . . That's me.

NURSE: Liat Hayim?

LIAT: Yes, that's me.

NURSE: Undress please.

LIAT: And then I find myself naked, facing all the instruments and cameras and figures. A meat market. People examining my body as if it were chicken meat at the supermarket.<sup>50</sup>

Each one of the works discussed here contains such a scene of examination or insemination at the clinic while the performer frontally spreads her legs open.<sup>51</sup> This leg-spreading is an effective and affective visual image, a concentrated performative capsule or *Gestus* that, through physical expression, exposes the operation of bio-power and bio-political relations not only inside the treatment room, but also between the state and its gendered citizens.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, this frontal gesture replicates the intimate relationship between the woman performer and the audience. Spreading her legs open for examination is an intimate act that almost every woman has to perform in the presence of a stranger (often a male physician or ultrasound technician, although it is no less embarrassing in the presence of a strange woman).

Re-enacting this pose on stage also reconstructs the embarrassment, the exposure, and vulnerability that the woman-performer experiences as she becomes the object of gaze, physical contact, examination, evaluation, and knowledge. In other words, this gesture effaces the split between performer and character to the effect that the performer's embodied presence and experience and her vulnerability and discomfort cannot be overlooked.





Left: 'Well, how's the view?' Tehila Fleischer (Irit Benedek) in the leg-spreading scene in *Mother of the Year*. Below: Tehila tells how, in her desperation, she had attended a women's circle in an attempt to connect spiritually with the fertilizing energies of Mother Earth. Photos: Pnina Neumann.



Thus, for example, in the scene cited above from *IV Yes or IV No*, Iris Harpaz performs in a frontal position, leaning uncomfortably on her hands and feet, as in a reversed table-top yoga pose. Maintaining this uncomfortable pose throughout the scene, she says in a critical tone, either to the indifferent, imaginary ultrasound technician or to the gazing audience:

How about saying 'I really appreciate you for undressing, I know it's not simple. Thanks for trusting me to examine you in such intimate places. You count for us, dear.'<sup>53</sup>

These feelings are particularly intensified considering the spatial characteristics of the

alternative venues where these works are performed, such as the (very) small stage at Tzavta 2 Theatre, Amir Orian's living room, or in an IVF hospital ward. In these very small spaces, intimacy and closeness are imposed. Just as the woman on the treatment table is examined invasively by a stranger, so is the performer closely examined by the audience. The usually frontal *mise-en-scène* of these one-woman shows and the heightened intimacy created in small spaces blur the distance between the gazing spectators and the gazed-at female performers. Consequently, the gesture of leg-spreading enables the performer to uncover and manage the patriarchal-medical-institutional power



The gestus of spread legs: negotiating the power relations of the spectatorial gaze in *My Best Ovum* with Adi Gilat as Tamar. Photo: Elitzur Reuveni.



Iris Harpaz as Liat Haim in *IV Yes or IV No (Fertility Record)*. Above: 'People examining my body as if it were chicken meat at the supermarket'. Opposite page, top: the sperm parade. Opposite page, bottom: post-performance discussion at the Assuta Hospital, Tel Aviv, with the staff of the IVF unit. Photos: Refael Bayer.

relations of the gaze in such a way that she is not only being looked at, but is also looking back.<sup>54</sup>

While the image of the legs spread for gynaecological examination is most probably recognized by all the spectators present, it is, at the same time, an embodied experience known and shared by all women in the audience and, particularly, given the context, by women being treated for fertility. Namely, while all the spectators (both women and men) are likely to decipher the physical image correctly on both the fictional level and the social one, it resonates in the body (and the mind) of the women much more intensively. Only they can somatically experience and identify with Tehilah addressing the intern who examines her in *Mother of the Year*: 'Well, how's the view? Enough, I'm cold! Are you through? Can I close them? (*She closes her legs without waiting for an answer.*)';<sup>55</sup> or with Tamar, being examined by the ultrasound technician:

TECHNICIAN: Raise your legs please and slide down with your pelvis.

TAMAR: Alright. . . Oooouch!!<sup>56</sup>

### The Notion of Knowingness

When a post-performance conversation between the creators and the audience took place (in those shows that we attended), it was clear that most of the responses and feedback were from women who identified with the performative act and wished to share with the rest of the audience their personal experience as women, with or without children, and as fertility treatment patients.

The men also did not remain indifferent to the effect of the gestic expression. In a talk held after a performance of *IV Yes or IV No* at the Room Theatre to a small audience of social workers and mental health practitioners, one of the participants, Tzvika (who introduced himself as a psychologist and couples therapist) responded to the gap

between the therapeutic position and the embodied, somatic experience of the patient, and said to Harpaz, creator-performer: 'You helped me sense my gut feeling. . . . This must reach every medical, therapeutic team.'<sup>57</sup>

The enacted image of legs spread open joins an entire set of physical and verbal expressions describing bodily reactions to examinations and treatments: cold and hot flashes, nausea, abdominal pain, euphoria, depression; and also expressions related to medical terms about fertility-treated women, which shape a 'knowingness' relationship with the performer/performance.

The notion of knowingness as an operative mode in performance is asserted and elaborated by historian Peter Bailey in his study of the Victorian music hall. Bailey considers knowingness to be an effective mode of expression that helps to formulate a closer relationship between performer and spectators. He writes: 'Knowingness might be defined as what everybody knows, but some know better.'<sup>58</sup> He expands on the notion of this practice, suggesting that 'it was through knowingness that the skilled performer mobilized the latent collective identity of an audience'.<sup>59</sup> Drawing on Louis Althusser's concept of 'interpellation', Bailey adds that knowingness as a means of interpellation 'is not just the calling into position of a particular subjectivity, but is more in the nature of a transaction or co-production'.<sup>60</sup> In other words, knowingness establishes reciprocity, implicating those who are in the know in the act.



The fact that some prior knowledge of the jargon specific to infertility treatments is needed – which explains why the one-page programme of *IV Yes or IV No* includes a glossary of terms such as ‘ovulation’, ‘IVF’, ‘protocol’, ‘oviterelle’, and ‘egg donation’ – divides the audience into those who probably do not know, those who know a little, and those who know from first-hand experience. These words tap into the shared knowledge and experience of women in the audience, in particular of women who have undergone fertility treatment, bringing them together as members of a distinctive community.

A sense of belonging, of being a part of a group, is fostered through knowingness. It can be observed that those who know respond in a more manifest way (laughing, murmuring) during the performance than those who do not know, occasionally explaining to the latter the meaning of terms or quietly sharing their experience. The critical stance of knowingness is grounded in its dialectic nature, as it both incorporates and challenges the official language of fertility treatments. Hence the politics of knowingness in these works is never simple. It is, writes Bailey, ‘not a direct refutation of these languages, to which it remains inescapably subordinated in the larger system of society; it is rather a *countervailing dialogue that sets experience against prescription*’.<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusion: Coming Out

Infertility, which for the purpose of our specific critical reading has been grouped together with childfree and childlessness, is an invisible disability, and hence it would be reasonable to believe that the infertile could (if they so chose) easily ‘pass’ as not disabled. Remennick points out that, ‘unlike obvious physical disability, infertility does not have external manifestations and can be uncovered only in the process of communication’, which is what these one-woman shows achieve when employing the stage as a public platform on which to share and communicate the creators’ invisible impairment.<sup>62</sup>

More often than not, this seemingly invisible disability becomes over-present and visible in everyday social interactions at a certain stage in a childless woman’s life. ‘Inability to bear children’, adds Remennick, ‘often becomes a “master status” for the affected persons (mostly women)’,<sup>63</sup> and the infertile and childless women, as is well expressed in these works, becomes a target of obsessive social scrutiny.

At one point in *Two Lines*, drowning in conflicting thoughts that pull her between persistent social expectations and her decision not to have children, Chani the protagonist quotes her co-worker: ‘Perhaps Galia, my colleague at school, is right in saying: “There are things one shouldn’t think of too much.”’<sup>64</sup> Chani’s internal conflicts reflect those that the playwright, Nadav Ruziewicz and his wife, struggled with. In an interview he notes:

Speaking to my parents, my brothers, and sisters-in-law, I remember how our dilemmas touched a nerve. They said that it was egoistic not to have children. . . . It practically destabilized their world view.<sup>65</sup>

And he adds that the line Galia says to Chani was actually based on what his sister-in-law, who has five children, had said to him. What comes out very clearly from the lines quoted is that procreation in Israel is considered to be a natural law beyond one’s choice or control. It is so deeply embedded in the Israeli social consciousness and world view that no one dares to question it or is expected to have (second) thoughts about it. In short, this is simply what one does – what everyone does.

What we have observed in these brave theatre works that openly and publicly engage with involuntary and voluntary childlessness is that the socially constructed ‘master status’ of the infertile woman or childfree couple is incompatible with the master narratives of pronatalist Israel. Performing infertility and childlessness thus constitutes a specific strategy of identity politics that gives voice to disadvantaged Israeli subjectivities.

## Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Hebrew are in our translations.

1. Moshe Shamir, *He Walked through the Fields*, in Herbert S. Joseph, ed., Audrey Hodes, trans., *Modern Israeli Drama: an Anthology* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983), p. 21–78.

2. See Avner Ben-Amos, 'He Walked through the Fields in 1948', in Gad Kaynar, Freddie Rokem, and Eli Rozik, ed., *The Cameri: a Theatre of Time and Place* (David and Yolanda Katz Faculty of the Arts, Tel Aviv University, 1999), p. 25–47 (in Hebrew).

3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006 [1983]).

4. Larissa Remennick, 'Childless in the Land of Imperative Motherhood: Stigma and Coping Among Infertile Israeli Women', *Sex Roles*, XLIII, No. 11–12 (2000), p. 821–41.

5. Meira Weiss, *The Chosen Body: the Politics of the Body in Israeli Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

6. See, for example, Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, 'Introduction: Disability Studies in Commotion with Performance Studies', in Sandahl and Auslander, ed., *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 1–12.

7. Israel has broken world records in the field of IVF treatment. For example, in a study comparing medically assisted reproduction and its regulation in Israel and in Austria, Carmel Shalev and Gabriel Werner-Felmayer revealed that, in Austria, the total number of IVF cycles in 2002 was 4,680, while in Israel it was 20,886. Another interesting statistic concerns the number of live births in 2004 following medically assisted reproduction procedures: in Austria it was 658, while in Israel 3,574. In the light of these figures, it is not surprising that fertility has become a thriving medical tourism industry in Israel in recent years. See Carmel Shalev and Gabriele Werner-Felmayer, 'Patterns of Globalized Reproduction: Egg Cells Regulation in Israel and Austria', *Israel Journal of Health Policy Research*, No. 1 (2012), available at <[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3424961/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3424961/)>.

8. The public committee of fourteen members comprised experts on fertility and childbirth, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, and an expert on the philosophy of ethics. Ministry of Health, 'Recommendations of the Public Committee on Examining Legislative Regulation of Fertility and Childbirth in Israel' (2012), p. 4, available at <<http://www.health.gov.il/publicationsfiles/bap2012.pdf>> [in Hebrew].

9. For example, the play *Herayon (Pregnancy)* by Goren Agmon (1986), a comedy about two young career-minded Israelis (yuppies) who attempt to evade a committed relationship at all costs; and *Dolphins* by Maya Shaya (2007), focusing on Netta, a young army widow who wishes to conceive with her fallen husband's sperm, while her parents want her to get on with her life and not proceed with her plan. Goren Agmon, *Herayon*, 1986, archived manuscript, Israeli Performing Arts Documentation Center, Tel Aviv University; Maya Shaya, *Dolphins*, 2007, archived manuscript, Hanoch Levin Institute for Israeli Playwrights.

10. In 2014 the first season of the documentary *Six Mothers* was also aired, following the life of six celebrity

mothers who revealed the effect that motherhood has had on their relationships and careers.

11. Mako TV, 'Watch: the Biggest Pregnancy Test in Israel', 26 October 2014, available at <[www.mako.co.il/tv-sneak-peek/Article-1892f4ff3fa4941006.htm](http://www.mako.co.il/tv-sneak-peek/Article-1892f4ff3fa4941006.htm)>.

12. Context is important here because the subject is a Hebrew performance by a Jewish creator presented at the only existing festival of Arabic-speaking monodramas. It is a festival that, because of its location (Akko, in the northern part of Israel) and its language, belongs to the periphery of the Israeli theatre scene. Iris Harpaz, *IV Ken or IV Lo – Tik Poriut*, unpublished manuscript, 2012, directed by Osnat Shank-Yoseph and performed by Iris Harpaz.

13. The Room Theatre was founded in 1985 by Amir Orian – actor, playwright, director, and acting teacher – and is located in Orian's living room in the heart of Tel Aviv.

14. Dorit Prumer-Barzilai, *Em Hasahna (Mother of the Year)*, unpublished manuscript, 2011, directed by Asaf Blau and performed by Irit Benedek.

15. Limor Ginzburg, *Ha'Beitzit Ha'Tova Sheli (My Best Ovum)*, unpublished manuscript, 2015, directed by Maya Nitzan and Ella Nikolovski and performed by Adi Gilat and Erez Kahana.

16. Yakir Eliyahu Vaknin, interview with Gillit Kroul, 6 August 2016.

17. Yakir Eliyahu Vaknin, *Poriya (Fertile)*, unpublished manuscript, 2016, directed by Yakir Eliyahu Vaknin and performed by Zohar Meidan. 'Poriya' is also in use as a female name, hence the tragic irony that the protagonist, named Poriya, is in fact infertile.

18. Nadav Ruziewicz, *Shnei Kavim (Two Lines)*, unpublished manuscript, 2016, directed by Galit Tsabari and performed by Shira Nathan.

19. There are dozens of fertility blogs in Hebrew comprising personal journals of fertility patients who share their experience, recommendations, and advice, support groups with options for online chat, and consultations with physicians. This finding is in line with Erin Striff's observation that there has been a slow, limited process of exposing infertility, mostly on the internet, by women who 'defy the privacy of infertility treatment, performing it blatantly and irreverently, resisting their own role as the compliant patient'. See Erin Striff, '"Infertile Me": the Public Performance of Fertility Treatments in Internet Weblogs', *Women and Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory*, XV, No. 2 (2005), p. 189–206, at p. 189.

20. Dorit Prumer-Barzilai, interview with Gillit Kroul, 27 January 2016.

21. Irit Benedek, interview with Gillit Kroul, 27 January 2016.

22. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for 'homeland' is *moledet*, derived from the same etymological root as the word for birth, *leida*, arguably indicating an association between procreation and nationality/national territory.

23. Anita Shapira, *New Jews, Old Jews* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), p. 157 (in Hebrew).

24. See, for example, Sachlav Stoler-Liss, 'Israeli "Baby and Child Care": the Social Construction of Israeli Babies and Mothers by Parents' Manuals', *Iyunim Betkumat Israel* No. 13 (2003), p. 277–93, at p. 277 (in Hebrew).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

26. Sachlav Stoler-Liss and Shifra Shvartz, 'The Hygiene of Woman's Life: Gender, Nationalism and

- Labour in the Writing of Gynaecologist Dr. Miriam Aharonova (1889–1967)', in Margalit Shilo and Gideon Katz, ed., *Gender in Israel: New Studies on Gender in the Yishuv and State*, Vol. 1 (Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Research of Israel and Zionism, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2011), p. 85–105, at p. 86 (in Hebrew).
27. Shoham Melamed Yehouda Shenhav, 'Beyond Nationalism: Neo-Malthusian Fertility Regime in a Pronatalist Context', in Yossi Yonah and Adriana Kemp, ed., *Citizenship Gaps: Migration, Fertility, and Identity in Israel* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2008), p. 125–66, at p. 134 (in Hebrew).
28. 'Protocol No. 227, of the Meeting of the Committee on Promotion of Women, Tuesday 15 October 2002, 11 a.m.', *Protocols/Status of Women/5879*, 11, Knesset, available at <[www.knesset.gov.il/protocols/data/rtf/maamad/2002-10-15.rtf](http://www.knesset.gov.il/protocols/data/rtf/maamad/2002-10-15.rtf)> (in Hebrew).
29. Harpaz, *IV Yes or IV No*, p. 6.
30. Prumer-Barzilai, *Mother of the Year*, p. 12.
31. Harpaz, *IV Yes or IV No*, p. 12.
32. Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 11.
33. Prumer-Barzilai, *Mother of the Year*, p. 20.
34. According to Ram, post-Zionism comprises three major critical approaches: post-modern, post-colonial, and post-Marxist, with each providing a specific critical perspective and explanation as to why Zionism is no longer a relevant national ideology. See Uri Ram, *The Time of the 'Post': Nationalism and the Politics of Knowledge in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008), p. 120–5 (in Hebrew).
35. See, for example, Orit Kamir, 'Zionism, Masculinity, and Feminism: Can They Co-Exist?' in Margalit Shilo and Gideon Katz, ed., *Studies in the Revival of Israel* (Ben Gurion Institute, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2011), p. 443–70 (in Hebrew).
36. See, for example, Ella Shohat, 'The Invention of the Mizrahim', *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXIX, No. 1 (Autumn 1999), p. 5–20.
37. See, for example, Michael Gluzman, *The Zionist Body: Nationalism, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature* (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz Hameuchad, 2007, in Hebrew).
38. See, for example, Weiss, *The Chosen Body*, 2002.
39. See Dror Harari, 'Performing the Un-Chosen Israeli Body: Nataly Zukerman's *Haguf Ha'acher*', *TDR: The Drama Review*, LX, No.1 (2016), p. 157–64.
40. Harpaz, *IV Yes or IV No*, p. 12.
41. Remennick, 'Childless in the Land of Imperative Motherhood', p. 822.
42. Elizabeth A. Sternke, Kathleen Abrahamson, 'Perceptions of Women with Infertility: on Stigma and Disability', *Sexuality and Disability*, XXXIII, No. 1 (2015), p. 3–17, at p. 5.
43. Stephen Castle, 'Contest for British Premier Flares Over Claims for Motherhood', *New York Times*, 9 July 2016 <[www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/world/europe/contest-for-british-premier-flares-over-claims-on-motherhood.html?ref=topics&r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/world/europe/contest-for-british-premier-flares-over-claims-on-motherhood.html?ref=topics&r=0)>.
44. Sternke and Abrahamson, 'Perceptions of Women with Infertility', p. 5.
45. Irit Benedek, interview with Gillit Kroul, 27 January 2016.
46. Weiss, *The Chosen Body*, p. 2.
47. Sagit Mor, 'Imagining the Law: the Construction of Disability in the Domains of Rights and Welfare – the Case of Israeli Disability Policy' (2005), p. 57, available at <<http://works.bepress.com/sagitmor/5>>.
48. Bat-Sheva Margalit-Stern, 'The "Law of Nature" Versus the "Dictate of the Movement": Motherhood and Non-Motherhood in the Yishuv (1920–1945)', in Margalit Shilo and Gideon Katz, ed., *Gender in Israel: New Studies on Gender in the Yishuv and State*, Vol. 1 (Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Research of Israel and Zionism, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2011), p. 170–97, at p. 176 (in Hebrew).
49. Prumer-Barzilai, *Mother of the Year*, p. 12.
50. Harpaz, *IV Yes or IV No*, p. 5.
51. It is important to point out that none of these one-woman shows include nudity, which certainly does not lessen the effectiveness of this gesture.
52. Meg Mumford offers a valuable explanation of Brecht's concept of the *Gestus*, suggesting that 'Gestus entails the aesthetic gestural presentation of the socio-economic and ideological construction of human identity and interaction'. See Meg Mumford, 'Gestic Masks and Brecht's Theatre: a Testimony to the Contradictions and Parameters of Realist Aesthetics', *Brecht Yearbook*, XXVI (2001), p. 143–71, at p. 144.
53. Harpaz, *IV Yes or IV No*, p. 5.
54. For further discussion on the notion of the (female) 'returned gaze' or 'counter-gaze' in respect of explicit body manifestations in feminist performance art, see Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 55–7.
55. Prumer-Barzilai, *Mother of the Year*, p. 7.
56. Ginzburg, *My Best Ovary*, p. 4.
57. At this performance, on 30 January 2016, all the spectators were therapy professionals – psychologists and social workers – attending the play as part of their studies in a new programme (the first of its kind in Israel), given at the School of Social Work at Tel Aviv University, 'Psychological Consultation and Therapy for Fertility Patients'.
58. Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 128.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 139, emphasis ours.
62. Remennick, 'Childless in the Land of Imperative Motherhood', p. 824.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Ruziewicz, *Two Lines*, p. 8.
65. Nadav Ruziewicz, interview with Gillit Kroul, 17 July 2016.