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# Displaying the Mizrahi Identity in Autobiographical Performances: Body, Food, and Documents

In this article Naphtaly Shem-Tov examines three Mizrahi autobiographical performances in Israel, exploring how they construct Mizrahi identity in different ways. The term 'Mizrahi' or 'Mizrahim' refers to Jews and their descendants originating in the Muslim and Arab countries. Although Mizrahim make up approximately half the Israeli population, their ethnic identity and culture are considered outside the dominant Israeli Western cultural orientation. The three autobiographical performances discussed here challenge these preconceptions and present an alternative, assertive identity for the Mizrahi community. The performers incorporate real elements – physical virtuosity, the preparation and serving of food, and the use of official documentation and personal records – to blur the lines between fiction and reality, and to draw attention to the different forms of oppression exerted on the Mizrahi identity. Naphtaly Shem-Tov is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Literature, Language and the Arts at the Open University of Israel. His publications include *Acco Festival: Between Celebration and Confrontation* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016).

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL performance *Simply Yossi Zabari* ends when Yossi Zabari sings a Yemenite Jewish liturgical song *a cappella*, dances a combined modern and Yemenite step and, in this manner, transforms his voice and body into a display and celebration of his talents and abilities.

Hannah Vazana Greenwald opens her performance *Papejeena* chopping vegetables to prepare *shakshuka* – a Jewish-Moroccan dish. Preparation of the dish lasts the length of her autobiographical narrative, and the appetizing smell stays with the spectators to the conclusion of the play, at which point the dish is served to the audience.

In Shlomo Vazana's autobiographical performance, *Inheriting Son*, he sits behind a desk and reads with an air of rebuke extracts from an academic article about the injustices committed by Israel toward Mizrahi citizens accommodated in public housing, as giant family photographs of his parents and brothers from housing projects are projected behind him.

Mizrahim, or Mizrahi Jews, are literally Easterners or Orientals, and the term refers

to Jews and their descendants originating in the Muslim and Arab countries. Most of them immigrated to Israel during the 1950s, and they make up about half the population of Israel today. However, their ethnic identity and culture are often considered outside the dominant Israeli Western cultural orientation.<sup>1</sup> Inherent in the autobiographical narrative underlying these three performances, this Mizrahi identity is enhanced by displaying real elements: physical virtuosity, the preparation and serving of food, and the use of official documentation and family records in performance. The acting modes and the incorporation of real elements in such performances display the Mizrahi identity not only in opposition to the cultural stereotypes with social oppression of the Mizrahi population in Israel, but also, in most cases, position it as an alternative.

The performers present these real elements to construct sensitively the personal conflicts in their autobiographical narratives as assertive Mizrahi identities, which highlight the political struggles regarding ethnicity in Israel.

The Israeli hegemony is, for the most part, made up of Ashkenazi Jews – Jews of European origin, mainly secular, and members of the middle class. The Zionist ideology led by this hegemony forced the Mizrahi Jews to conform to the Sabra role model of the ‘new Jew’, styled to white-Western criteria. They had to pass through the ‘Zionist melting-pot’, that is, to detach themselves from the traditions they brought with them from their countries and remove every Arabic element of the culture and language that made up their identity.

### ‘Ashkenazification’ and After

This detachment from and removal of the Judeo-Arabic identity is derived from the orientalist Zionist ideology that views Mizrahi culture as inferior and primitive due to a prolonged history in the Arab and Muslim world as well as the conception that everything connected to an Arab identity is part of the enemy culture.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the Mizrahim had to shed this ‘Arabness’ and discipline their language, their accents, their bodies and customs, their religious beliefs, and their aesthetic taste, to become ‘Israelis’.<sup>3</sup> In critical terms, this process is referred to as Ashkenazification: to transform into a new Jew/Israeli means being an Ashkenazi who meets Western standards.<sup>4</sup>

The same orientalist approach of the Israeli hegemony drove a socio-economic policy that sent Mizrahim to areas far from the centre, with little employment and no suitable educational, cultural, or health services. These factors taken together are what confined them to the inferior social position they have occupied throughout the history of the state of Israel, and made them dependent on the welfare system.<sup>5</sup>

These two processes of erasure or cultural detachment and socio-economic discrimination created negative stereotypes about Mizrahi Jews in Israeli culture.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, these elements of the Zionist ideological apparatus created feelings of shame, denial, and concealment among young Mizrahi Jews, while also sowing resistance, protest, and struggle among them.<sup>7</sup>

Uri Cohen and Nissim Leon argue that, since the 1980s, a middle class of second-generation Mizrahi has emerged due to economic, geographic, and educational changes.<sup>8</sup> However, they also claim that this new Mizrahi middle class is ‘frequently forced to contend with the strategies of isolation, opposition, and obstruction adopted by the hegemonic Ashkenazi middle-class elites’.<sup>9</sup> In this context, it is not surprising that, from the 1990s, social and political Mizrahi NGOs were established, aiming for sociopolitical transformation, and the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition was established in 1996 by Mizrahi intellectuals, academics, activists, journalists, and artists in order to advance equality and justice in Mizrahi issues.

It mainly deals with land distribution by the state and the residents’ rights to public housing, as is explained in more detail later. Members of Rainbow Coalition have become a dominant group in the Israeli media and in public discussions that have highlighted the Mizrahi points of view on public issues.

Akhoti, translated as ‘my sister’, is the Mizrahi feminist movement established in 2000 to advance Mizrahi and other marginalized women, who have been excluded by the Ashkenazi feminist discourse.

Akhoti’s projects often combine a struggle against sexism and racism, with discussion of economic empowering and Mizrahi cultural creation. In 2009 Mizrahi feminists also established ‘The Heart at East’, the Coalition for Equal Distribution of Cultural Funds in Israel, in order to ensure Mizrahi artists receive funding from the Ministry of Culture.

The Coalition works in two areas: first, by producing research reports that expose ongoing discrimination in the distribution of cultural subsidies according to ethnic and national categories; second, by producing an annual festival to display Mizrahi culture in all the arts, including theatre and performance. The autobiographical performances are part of these processes to re-present the Mizrahi narrative and identity in the cultural space, where issues that are discussed in the critical Mizrahi discourse are performed artistically on the stage.

In the past two decades, Mizrahi autobiographical performance, based on individual personal, familial, and cultural experience, has come to the fore. In this mode, a performer displays her Mizrahi identity and draws attention to it in a gesture against shame, concealment, denial, and the processes of Ashkenazification. Display of Mizrahi identity offers a range of possibilities from protest and defiance of socio-economic and cultural oppression to a celebration and demonstration of the rich culture that has been repressed and erased. Likewise, the performance occasionally contains a meta-theatrical dimension as the performer's biography is connected to the world of stage and screen, as well as the complex and problematic manner in which this cultural field addresses the Mizrahi identity of the artist.

### Empowering the Marginalized

In the 1970s, at the height of the second wave of feminism, which declared 'the personal is political', feminine autobiographical performance arose in the West to model a feminist political statement. From the 1980s to the 1990s, such autobiographical performance trickled down to other marginalized groups in the West as a political strategy, including blacks, Hispanics, members of the LGBT community, and others. Through such performances, dominant identities were challenged and, in contrast, alternative identities were modelled and established.<sup>10</sup> Mizrahi autobiographical performance is part of this global phenomenon, with Mizrahi artists, as part of a marginalized group, utilizing autobiographical material to shape an ethnic identity and narrative, to empower their group and oppose the stereotypes and social and cultural oppression of the Israeli mainstream.

Autobiographical performance challenges Eric Bentley's classic formulation of 'A impersonates B while C looks on', because, *prima facie*, the performer is on stage impersonating herself, recounting and enacting experiences from her own life.<sup>11</sup> This is based on the assumption that the performer has the ability to reveal an 'authentic' self that is stable and coherent, and exists in the first

place. But autobiography is merely a literary and theatrical genre that constructs memories and their subsequent stylization for aesthetic, political, therapeutic, and even commercial ends, and, therefore, contains imaginary changes and additions. The autobiographical performance is a construction and modelling of the 'self' and, in any event, has no possibility of authenticity even if what is involved is a performer embodying herself. The performance takes precedence and constitutes the 'self' of the performer, and it does not express an existing *a priori* essence.

Following in the wake of Derrida's concept of *différance*, Auslander deconstructs the stable 'self' underlying conventional acting methods:

Theorists as diverse as Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Grotowski all implicitly designate the actor's self as the *logos* of performance; all assume that the actor's self precedes and grounds her performance and that it is the presence of this self in performance that provides the audience with access to human truths. . . . An examination of acting theory through the lens of deconstruction reveals that the self is not an autonomous foundation for acting, but is produced by the performance it supposedly grounds.<sup>12</sup>

He goes on to explain how assessments and understanding of acting emanate from Derrida's *différance* rather than a stable and extant essence:

We arrive at our perception of a performance by implicitly comparing it with other interpretations of the same role (or with the way we feel the role should be played), or with our recollection of the same actor in other roles, or with our knowledge of the stylistic school to which the actor belongs, the actor's private life, etc. If our perception of the actor's work derives from this play of differences, how can we claim to be able to read the presence of the actor's self back through that performance?<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, Auslander claims that even the Brechtian actor, who deliberately differentiates herself from the character she signifies and who supposedly is herself on stage, is merely playing a 'stage persona'.<sup>14</sup> Following in the footsteps of this assumption, Marvin Carlson, in his discussion of the autobiographical performance, argues that

there is necessarily a difference between the 'I' who lived that experience and the 'I' who narrates it to an audience.<sup>15</sup> The character the actor is embodying, even if it is supposedly identified with her own self, is shaped like any other fictional character through imitation and representation. There is no overlap between the physically 'present I' of the performer and the 'I' the performer was 'then and there' in the autobiographical experience. Carlson argues that this is actually a constructed 'stage persona' of the performer rather than a direct and authentic expression of selfhood. The performer rehearses, shapes, and constructs her stage persona in the same way as working on any other character.

### Enacting the Mizrahi Identity

To examine the manner of enacting the stage persona in which the Mizrahi identity is displayed, the three modes of acting posited by Bert States are used.<sup>16</sup> First is the self-expressive mode, in which the performer emphasizes the actor's virtuosity, her charisma, attractive and exciting presence, and her mastery of nuance. Likewise, her physical abilities are demonstrated, as is her performing aptitude in song and dance, and so forth. The audience's attention is directed to the performer and less to the character or role she is portraying or filling on the stage. As States puts it: 'In the self-expressive mode, the actor *seems* to be performing on his own behalf. He says, in effect, "*See what I can do.*"'<sup>17</sup>

Second, there is the collaborative mode. The performer turns directly to the audience and transforms them from passive observers (voyeurs) to collaborators in the event in various ways. 'Theatre says to the spectator, "Why should we pretend that all this is an illusion? We are in this together. We are doing this for you."<sup>18</sup> The performer draws the audience in and sometimes gives them a role in the fictional world, attempting to turn it into a community. The performer deliberately blurs the borders between herself and the spectator, which might create intimacy but is also liable to provoke thought on the part of the spectator regarding the mech-

anisms of representation as such and the medium of theatre.

The final mode is the representational one. The performer's emphasis is on a fictional character, and the actor 'disappears', as it were, into the character, upon which the audience's attention is mostly focused. The stage illusion becomes the focal point of observation and influences the audience's experience.

States emphasizes that these three modes of acting exist in the same performance to different extents and to different degrees of emphasis, so that the audience would be impressed by the actor's talent and expressiveness, become complicit in the actor's direct address, and be moved by the actions of the fictional character on the stage. In the Mizrahi autobiographical performance, the stage persona emphasizes the expressive mode because the actor displays herself through her body, her skills, and life experiences and not through a fictional world far removed from herself.

Furthermore, the collaborative mode is highly present, given that direct address to the audience is used to recount and represent for them the performer's life experiences, turning them into collaborators. The stage persona enables a display of Mizrahi identity in the sense of 'Look at me, this is my life, these are my memories and culture, and these are the conflicts that shaped me.' The increasing use of the expressive and collaborative modes over and above the representational emphasizes that autobiography on stage is no more than a metonymy for the story of the many Mizrahi Jews, some of whom are also present in the auditorium. In this manner, an assertive Mizrahi identity is shaped that neither succumbs to the 'backward' Mizrahi stereotype nor is erased in favour of Ashkenazification that denies any ethnic identification.

The prevailing assumption is that autobiography is not a revelation and realization of the 'self', but styles, constructs, and even invents a 'self' for the actor of the performance.<sup>19</sup>

Deirdre Heddon disputes the tendency to mark the autobiographical as nothing but

fiction, and claims that, despite the performance being constructed, mediated, and not authentic,

the fact that a performer is in this space with me might well have an impact on my reception of his/her autobiographical stories. That relationship between performer and spectator does set this mediation of experience apart from other modes. Though it is no less mediated, its different form of mediation enables a potentially different impact that can be capitalized upon strategically.<sup>20</sup>

When the spectator knows that the performance is based upon the performer's life experiences, the political and social charge of the performance increases and turns the personal stage narrative into a metonymy for the silenced and marginalized social narrative. Hence, the mediation and construction of the autobiographical performance from personal materials is indeed not authentic, but it is also not the same mediation and construction of fictional narrative.

Carol Martin explains why the 'reality effect' occurs in what she terms 'Theatre of the Real', meaning performances based on real events such as documentary theatre, community-based theatre, and even autobiographical performance.<sup>21</sup> She claims that despite this construction and blurring between the real and the fictional, 'factual' elements – such as history books, interviews, testimonies, family photographs, documentary videos, archival and internet sources – serve the audience as 'evidence' for the 'authenticity' of the experiences and events on stage.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, there are signifiers on the stage that work as evidence for the audience that are different from 'facts'. Hence, such pieces of 'evidence' mediate differently and effectively the narrative on stage. Yet it is important to note that Martin discusses many forms of this type of theatre, and calls into question the veracity of much of it.

### The Display of the Mizrahi Body

The declaration 'I have always wanted to be a dancer' opens *Simply Yossi Zabari* (2004), where Yossi Zabari skilfully narrates, sings,

and dances the story of his life as the son of a Jewish-Yemenite family. He humorously describes how he wanted to be a performer from a young age, and how the hardships that stood in his way were tied to his Mizrahi identity, especially in terms of casting, as a racially discriminatory professional practice.

His desire to be a dancer and actor stood against the perception of the Mizrahi body within the Zionist conception of the body, as Yochai Oppenheimer explains:

The Western Ashkenazi body continued to serve as a normative model of health and hygiene and of social and sexual functionality, while the Mizrahi body, in Ashkenazi fantasy, was defective and menacing because it exhibited the precise opposite of these traits. . . . The Mizrahi male body was associated with an outmoded, religious culture, while the Ashkenazi body belonged to a young, vital, strong culture.<sup>23</sup>

The body in theatre is a site of power since it is presented with its powers and disabilities; thus the ways the body is presented in performance can assert or undermine received world views.<sup>24</sup>

Susan Bennett claims that, in an autobiographical performance, the performer's body is transformed into a body politic, signifying social identity.<sup>25</sup> It is thus not surprising that the self-expressive mode is a counter-reaction through which Zabari celebrates and showcases his body, voice, and performative abilities in writing, acting, singing, and dancing. The celebration of the Mizrahi body acts against the shame, denial, and suppression as effects of the Zionist melting pot, which demands that the 'backwards' Mizrahi identity be discarded.

Zabari's body is well-built, his skin is very dark, and his guttural speech is a conclusive corporeal and vocal signification of his Mizrahi identity.<sup>26</sup> On an empty stage with a screen as a backdrop, he appears in black pants, a white shirt, and tap-dance shoes, accompanied by a pianist when singing. His childhood Purim pictures are projected on to the screen: one is of a Yemenite dancer in a jellaba clutching a tin box, the other of a female gypsy dancer.<sup>27</sup> He tells of his dream of being 'Margot Fonteyn' – but on Purim,



'they made me into Margalit, the butcher lady', and he was dressed as a gypsy dancer rather than a ballerina. Such dreams are, of course, in contrast to the boys who dressed up as soldiers, cowboys, and superheroes.

During the performance, he dances two dances that combine tap dance with Mizrahi rhythm. The first dance is to the tune of Ahinoam Nini's (Noa's) 'Nocturnal Hymn', which depicts a transformation from darkness to a ray of light. The dark body that celebrates the light, displaying its Mizrahi identity while, with great virtuosity, dancing a combined tap dance and Yemenite step, is seemingly freed from gravity. In the second dance, at the end of the performance, the image of a Yemenite man dancing with a tin box on Purim, the image he had tried to escape, recurs in a more sophisticated way. Zabari gives thanks for everything that happened to him throughout his life, singing the liturgical poem *Odeh le'eli* ('I Thank My God') by Rabbi Shalom Shabazi (1619–86), one of Yemenite Jewry's most celebrated poets and religious leaders. Zabari sings in a Yemenite drawl, and tap dances afterwards – an ending that weaves together the different strands of his contested identity into a powerful utopian performative moment – as Jill Dolan defines this:

Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this 'now' of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we're seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later. The affective and ideological 'doings' we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm.<sup>28</sup>

The close of the performance combines symbolically a future option containing the cultures and differences of East and West, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi. It also points to the great cultural and artistic potential of such a combination of materials perceived as incongruous and even culturally and hierarchically opposed. Singing and dancing illustrate corporeally a new Israeli future beyond ethnic divisions and hierarchies.

Zabari narrates his fierce desire to be a performer while singing a Hebrew translation of the Danny Kaye song, 'The Maladjusted Jester' from the 1956 film *The Court Jester*. Humorously and at a rapid pace, he sings of the fact that, despite his parents' opposition, he became a 'jester' – that is, a performer with a hard life – because 'being ridiculous is a very serious thing / and a clown has to work doubly hard for bread and water / It's very hard to be a jester'. Between stanzas, he pauses and narrates the difficulties of acceptance – how Ashkenazification was an oppressive apparatus that was wielded by teachers and directors trying to fashion him differently.

Ashkenazification is, in fact, a hegemonic performance to assimilate into the dominant culture. However, it is a very fragile process which often fails, as the signs of Mizrahi identity may bubble up at any time, and signify the Mizrahi identity of one who had been taken for Ashkenazi.<sup>29</sup> In Zabari's case, with his skin colour and guttural speech as explicit and sharp signifiers, failure of this process was a foregone conclusion, also acting as a barrier to his advancement in the Israeli theatre field.

Elvira Kohanoff, Zabari's voice coach at Beit Zvi Drama School, was very unhappy with his accent, which included guttural consonants:

Kohanoff orders me: 'You cannot sing with a *Khet* and *Ayin*.' Why? 'Because air must be free to float around the larynx. The sounds, these guttural vocalizations, stop the air from flowing, barring good voice production.' I never asked her, but in my heart I thought, how come Umm Kalthoum and Zohar Argov had such good voice production despite the fact that the air did not flow freely though their larynx? . . . At the end of the class she added: 'Even in the yard, during recess, don't speak with a *Khet* and *Ayin*, have you ever heard an actor speak so, and what kind of thing is it anyway?'<sup>30</sup>

Kohanoff's criticisms were just the beginning, as Zabari's visible background was a hindrance for casting directors of stage and screen. He tells of his excitement when important Israeli director Omri Nitzan invited him to act in *Murder* by the canonical Israeli



*Papejeena: the Mother* (Limor Zamir) preparing food, as throughout the play, Photo: David Kaplan.

playwright Hanoach Levin, and his disappointment upon learning that the role would be almost textless – that of an Arab youth who undergoes abuse and lies dead on the sand for the entire production.

Thus it is unsurprising that *Simply Yossi Zabari* is a spectacle of his acting, singing, and dancing abilities. The performance itself is, in fact, a kind of ‘audition’, showcasing Zabari’s skills, which may open casting possibilities in institutional theatre. Heddon claims that nowadays there is a move from the political to the commercial in autobiographical performance, as young actors use it to showcase their abilities and talent.<sup>31</sup> However, the commercial aspect of *Simply Yossi Zabari* derives from the refusal to cast him because of his dark features and vocal pattern. The spectacle of talent in this autobiographical performance is thus a form of political protest against the racist casting discourse of the mainstream.<sup>32</sup> Yossi Zabari,

then, displays and celebrates Mizrahi identity that constitutes not merely a novel social representation but also concrete political action within the field of theatre itself.

### Food and Memory as Mizrahi Display

The smell of appetizing cooked food wafts through the air as one enters the hall of the Jaffa Theatre to watch Hannah Vazana Greenwald’s *Papejeena: Fictional Autobiographical Story Theatre* (2010). The subtitle’s oxymoron is present in the flavourful cooking, resting between fiction and reality, and between the semiotic and the phenomenological. Preparing and displaying the food, as well as inviting the audience to eat, breaks the boundary between all the participants of the theatrical event, and is a shift of focus to the performance’s materiality.

We find a family of Moroccan descent in Jaffa in the late 1970s. The action occurs

during one event-packed Friday in the home of twelve-year-old Yemimah, a naive and slightly clumsy girl, who is based on Vazana Greenwald's own childhood. Yemimah undergoes an 'accelerated' puberty when she deals with her complex relation to her own body, discovers her sexuality, and is exposed to her parents' murky relationship.

Vazana Greenwald plays Adult-Yemimah, who narrates the story and mediates between the stage and the audience, so the protagonist is bifurcated between Adult-Yemimah and Young-Yemimah, played by Moriah Bashari. Although Vazana Greenwald preferred not to use her real name for the protagonist, changing it to Yemimah, she is not a completely fictional character, since it is clear to the audience that Yemimah is based on her life experiences.

Marvin Carlson describes such a situation as a continuum, with several possibilities veering between the pole of a completely fictional character and an actor playing a stage persona.<sup>33</sup> This is an interim case that

expressly blurs the autobiographical and the fictional. The collaborative mode of acting is dominant since this is a story theatre in which Vazana Greenwald acts as Adult-Yemimah, who is not only the narrator but also changes settings and directs the characters on the stage. Thus the bifurcation allows Adult-Yemimah, a grown woman, not only to look back at the girl she was, but also to steer and, in fact, direct the dramatic scene, blurring the actual present and autobiographical past.

Throughout the performance, the mother character prepares for the Sabbath, working at the stove to prepare Jewish-Moroccan food. Food preparation takes place ceaselessly throughout the performance, even when the focus of the events and lighting is elsewhere on stage. The smell of food accompanies the audience, whetting their appetites and, at the end of the performance, the spectators are invited to eat.

Dorothy Chansky and Ann Folino White claim that food preparation on stage links



Stage setting for *Papejeena*. Old Yemimah is behind the father, reading, with Young Yemimah under the table. Photo: David Hayun.



the real, the symbolic, and the political, among other things, by relating smell and taste to personal and communal memory in the audience.<sup>34</sup> The display of Mizrahi food fashions a here-and-now experience with a critically ethnic meaning through its placement in autobiographical memory, presented by the bifurcation of the protagonist into Young- and Adult-Yemimah. The bifurcation strengthens the blurring of actual cooking time and its representation as tumultuous, stressful, Friday afternoon cooking, integrating the actual experience with a fictional representation, that is accomplished mainly through the spectacular display of food preparation, with the very real smell and taste whetting not only the appetite but also personal memory, which is, simultaneously, communal Mizrahi memory.

### The Stage Picture and the Body

On stage is a large kitchen table with a gas range, pots, a variety of different vegetables, eggs, oil, and spices, as well as kitchenware. Under the table is a surface with a blanket acting as Young-Yemimah's bed. In the back are two movable white screens adorned with arabesques. The performance opens with Adult-Yemimah cutting up vegetables and beginning to cook. She narrates how, as a young girl, she tried to skip teacher Tal Butshtein's gym class – an Ashkenazi teacher who fits 'the chosen body' of Zionist and Western conception, as Meira Weiss calls it, paraphrasing 'the chosen people' who now select and idealize certain bodies and stigmatize others.<sup>35</sup>

Immediately after the opening, the discord between the rich food and its central place in the Mizrahi-Jewish tradition, especially in its preparation for the Sabbath, and the plodding, problematic body, is established. Shulamit Lev-Aladgem and Anat First have shown how Mizrahi community-based theatre often deals with Mizrahi women in a cultural bind between the patriarchal message that a woman's place is in the kitchen – and therefore, preparation of food is how they structure their relations to husband and children – and the message of the dominant

culture, demanding a svelte and thin body: this is a Catch-22 that creates disorder and body shame.<sup>36</sup>

Adult-Yemimah moves one of the screens and Young-Yemimah enters, relating her plan to make her sweatpants disappear so she does not have to participate in gym lessons in school. The moving of the screen is the possibility of the entrance of autobiographical memory and its visualization on stage. The refusal to work out originates in body shame. Young-Yemimah's feet need orthopaedic shoes and she feels clumsy. Her dress is dishevelled, her laces are untied, her collar is rumped. She says of her sweatpants: 'This elastic suffocated my fat feet.' The lighting is focused on Adult-Yemimah, who slowly lifts her dress to reveal full legs, as opposed to the slender legs of Bashari, the actress playing Young-Yemimah.

A feeling of stark irony between Bashari's slender body and how Young-Yemimah thinks of herself is established. Vazana Greenwald's exposure of her full thighs also signifies self-acceptance as Adult-Yemimah. The derisive Moroccan term 'papejeena' strengthens the links between food and the body:

YOUNG-YEMIMAH: Papejeena is my second name

ADULT-YEMIMAH: Dough girl

YOUNG-YEMIMAH: That is, my moniker

ADULT-YEMIMAH: Dough woman

YOUNG-YEMIMAH: My hated pet name. That reminds me of everything I'm not

MOTHER (*defensively/compassionately*):

Not so fast

Not so responsible

Not so alert

Not so organized, not so . . .

YOUNG-YEMIMAH (*justifying*): When Mother says

MOTHER: Papejeena

YOUNG-YEMIMAH: I know she means that this girl will come to –

MOTHER: Nothing

*Mother takes Young-Yemimah to a chair, puts the pants on her and sends her to stage left.*

Her hands are dough, her feet are dough, everything falls from her hands, you forgot the pants, hurry up you're already late for school, and tie your shoelaces, how many times have I told you that when you walk around like that you can fall, pick up your hair, you're late for school, quick. Papejeena, it's a good thing your head is screwed on.<sup>37</sup>



Above: the Mother (Limor Zamir) with Young Yemimah (Moria Bashari). Below: Old-Yemima (Hannah Vazana Greenwald) and the Father (Shemulik Matalon). Photos: David Hayun.



The epithet for clumsiness, 'Papejeena' – unrisen risen dough in Moroccan – is a culinary image differentiating fresh dough, which becomes nourishing bread at the end of the day, and dough that cannot grow and develop; between rich food cooked quickly and skilfully by the mother and the daughter's heaviness and lack of bodily orientation.

Young-Yemimah's shame of her body is, in fact, the shame of Mizrahi femininity, which she perceives as incapable of fitting in. Young-Yemimah can neither conform to the dominant demands of a gym class that promotes the Zionist-Ashkenazi conception of women, nor to the Mizrahi-traditional model of being a quick, skilful cook.

Yemimah's mother is a quick and sexual woman – the opposite to her strict husband, who tries to discard his Mizrahi identity and educate her about Zionism and Israeliness. He demands that she read a Hebrew newspaper aimed at new Jewish immigrants, but, rather than read it, she uses it to clean her house for the Sabbath. The mother's sexuality is expressed with Arab itinerant salesman Bulbul, who is in love with her.

After Bulbul carries Young-Yemimah home when she sprains her foot, he passionately courts her mother. He stands behind her, caressing her hands while she prepares the food, and sings an Arabic love song. Mother enjoys the touch and gives in to him, until she notices her daughter looking and shrugs Bulbul off. This scene also allows Young-Yemimah to get to know herself. Towards the end, she ravenously eats all the delicacies on the table and then, with her hands oily from the salads, she masturbates.

### The Rules of Food – and Sex

Dror Harari writes about Tamar Raban's *Dinner Dress*, which deals with Raban's childhood and preparing food during the performance:

Food, like sex, is the uncanny element that is physically and psychically connected to sensual arousal and restraint. Both are driven by impulses that are often restricted or suppressed and are mastered by social rules; both are associated with pleasure, fantasy, and transgression.<sup>38</sup>

In *Papejeena*, the dinner table is also a bed, and the link between Mizrahi food and explosive feminine sexuality is tied to the idea of Arabic touch as soft and light. There is, here, a double transgression – against the patriarchal order and the Zionist order – and so the wooing scene is rhythmic, short, and lit in red as a kind of fantasy where Mother fulfils her womanhood – moreover as an Arab-Jew. Young-Yemimah's sexual pleasure also ends abruptly as the smell of burning food reaches the nose of her father, who comes into the room, bellowing. A fight erupts between the father and the mother, as the father is angry that his wife has left her cooking and has allowed Bulbul to come into their house. He finally throws the burnt food in her face, refusing to sit down to eat.

Young-Yemimah, Mother, and Adult-Yemimah as narrator sit down to watch an Arabic movie as a distant melodrama, the way many Mizrahim in Israel watched these films on Fridays during the 1970s and 1980s. Mother weeps in sadness in front of the television. A gulf opens in her problematic relationship with her husband, which represents the Mizrahi problematic relation to oppressive Israeliness.

After the end of the performance, the audience is invited to eat the Moroccan delicacies that were cooked throughout the performance, as well as to converse with the actors and get to know them.

The Mizrahi food points out the ambivalence of the Israeli hegemony towards the Mizrahi identity. Mizrahi cuisine has become popular, perceived as tasty in the Israeli kitchen, but is also cheap and classless. It is one of the supposedly 'positive' signifiers of Mizrahi identity, but it also reproduces the orientalist stereotype of 'warm, hospitable people'. Liora Givion explains that Mizrahi food forms part of Mizrahi women's labour in the kitchen:

Despite differences in staple accessibility, first-generation immigrants tend to reproduce their foods and conserve familiar eating routines, both due to habit and due to a desire to assuage feelings of alienation and assimilation hardship.<sup>39</sup>

Givion claims that, in practice, these women



The Arab itinerant salesman Bulbul (Eyal Salmaand) with the Mother. Photo: David Kaplan

are agents of practical feminine knowledge that is part of a communal and historical memory. In the performance, food signifies in a dual fashion as both guarantor and transgressor of the gender and national status quo. True, Mother works and cooks as usual throughout the performance to please her husband and family, but this is also where her Jewish-Arab culture is expressed and so also where the temporary romantic relationship with Arab itinerant salesman Bulbul takes place.

### A Document of Protest

Shlomo Vazana's *Inheriting Son* (2002) displays Mizrahi identity through the integration of the personal and the historical. The piece deals with social protest and the opp-

ressive history of Mizrahim from the time of their immigration to Israel to the present day, through the prism of public housing.

Vazana uses documentary theatre, which veers between testimony theatre and verbatim theatre – unsurprisingly, as he is an artist who grew up in the pioneering Mizrahi community-based theatre of the Katamonim neighbourhood of Jerusalem in the 1970s.<sup>40</sup> The performance is based on his personal struggle with Amidar – the largest public housing company in Israel – which tried to evict him from his parents' apartment after they died.

He subsequently led wide social protests with a coalition of NGOs such as Kol Bashchunot and the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow to change the Israeli public housing law, with the Israel High Court of Justice



granting his petition regarding injustices in land distribution in Israel.

While dealing with the threat of eviction, Vazana stumbled upon the legal status of 'inheriting son', prompting him to conduct in-depth research that exposed clear public housing inequality between residents of urban neighbourhoods, mostly working-class Mizrahim, and the land privileges of the sons and daughters of Kibbutz and Moshav residents.<sup>41</sup> While the state recognized the right of 'inheriting son' to inherit parents' land on Kibbutz and Moshav, even though the land is owned by the state, it perceived the offspring living with their parents in public housing as 'interlopers' after their parents' death.<sup>42</sup>

The struggle Vazana headed succeeded in changing the law, and allowed public housing residents to inherit the rights of deceased parents as well as the possibility of purchasing the apartment at a lower price.

The performance combines official documents, letters, and academic papers with pictures and video art. Set designer Eitan Levy designed the stage as an archive with cardboard boxes stacked one on top of the other, creating the image of a crowded, uniform, working-class housing project. Family pictures and video art recreating some of the events and relating to the death of Vazana's mother and his partner's pregnancy are projected on to the cardboard boxes. The image of the archive and the image of the housing project unite, showing the gulf between the classified and classifying bureaucratic documents that have power over the Mizrahi residents of the project. Alternately, each box is a painful family story relegated to the margins of the national narrative.

A second theme interweaves life with death, as expressed in the video art. Family pictures of Vazana with his parents and siblings as children in the 1950s are projected on to the screen, while contemporary pictures of the *Kaddish* (the Jewish mourning prayer) and farewell from Vazana's mother represent the silence of the first Mizrahi generation. The sound track, composed by musician Shushan, is based on Moroccan elegies, not only on the death of a mother but also on the

injustice and oppression experienced by the parents' generation, and its inability to cry out its pain.

This is followed by a nude dance by Vazana's partner, the dancer and choreographer Yael Haramati, who is seen in the late stages of pregnancy with their son, and who represents the third Mizrahi generation. Thanks to his struggle, this generation will achieve recognition and legitimization as 'inheriting sons'. Furthermore, the mere projection in magnified form of his family members, and especially of his mother, has political meaning in itself, since it concretely visualizes those who are absent, marginalized from, and suppressed by the national narrative.

Vazana is collaborative, since he turns directly to the Israeli audience as participants in the theatrical event, and demands that each spectator should take ethical and political responsibility for injustices that he reveals on the stage.

On centre stage are a chair and desk. Documents lie on the desk from which Vazana reads the central thesis of the essay 'The National Home and the Personal Home'.<sup>43</sup> The foundation of public housing in Israel was meant to transfer the Mizrahi immigrants of the 1950s, who had been living in Ma'abarot (tent and hut refugee camps), to housing projects. However, public housing was also a control mechanism, as these buildings were built on the periphery and meant for defence. Therefore, the state preferred to rent the apartments to Mizrahi immigrants (rather than sell them), and ownership remained in the state's hands.

In this way, Mizrahim were stuck in cheap public housing, and were unable to move from the periphery because their housing was under the exclusive control of the state. They were also unable to bequeath the apartment to their children, even though for many years they paid rent equivalent to the apartment's worth. This stood in stark contrast to the 'inheriting son' policy allowing transfer of state land rights by Moshav and Kibbutz farmers and their children.

Vazana's reading of the document is powerful, crisp, and clear, and he fixes his

accusatory gaze on the audience. He deconstructs the text into some hundred key words, each uttered in a strong, resounding voice – words such as ‘roof, sovereignty, state, dispersal, settlement, enemy, colonization, historical circumstances, architecture, the fifties, mass immigration, stratified structure, poor state, capitalists, backwardness, fantasy, Orientalism, regime, occupation, public housing. The deconstruction of the Zionist discourse becomes the literal deconstruction of key terms that do not need to be formulated into sentences, as gaps are easily completed in the consciousness of the Israeli spectator. They also signify how Zionist ideology constructs the Israelis sitting in the audience as subjects of this narrative.

The performance was perceived in the context of the Israel Festival, a prestigious international performing arts festival that showcases first-tier troupes and artists from Israel and the world. Vazana says the invitation from Ofira Henig, the festival director,

both surprised and moved me because in recent years, I have moved away from work in the theatre because I realized that Israeli theatre is entirely Ashkenazi and the Israel Festival is the bastion of the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois event.<sup>44</sup>

The reception of his performance veered between reservation, anger, and excitement. Well-known Israeli theatre critic Michael Handelsaltz saw it as a socially effective play, but felt that Vazana’s ‘righteous social protest becomes a show of ego with no boundaries’, concluding that it is a ‘headline-like, dark, and rough’ performance.<sup>45</sup> Reacting to this harsh criticism, Nurit Cohen-Evron, art lecturer at Beit Berl College, wrote a personal letter to Vazana, stating that ‘after reading the newspaper critique, I felt the need to react’. She claimed that

the intimate and general touch fiercely, wounding, disjointedly and associatively. Neither are easily digestible. . . . Vazana shouts. He is not ‘nice’. . . . He courageously uses unusual juxtapositions, using the language of the contemporary visual art and dance worlds. Apparently it takes a festival to see things even slightly defying the conventions spectators and critics have grown accustomed to being staged in the theatre.<sup>46</sup>

Another furious response came from spectator ‘A.L.’, a farmer from a Moshav in central Israel. He complained that the festival had a one-sided approach to ‘a very fierce and socially charged debate and allowed the lambasting of a very specific group in society’. He claims that ‘the words “oppression” and “exploitation” . . . are incitement pure and simple’, adding that ‘such incitement has exacted a blood price . . . and most importantly, the Rabin assassination’.<sup>47</sup> Festival Manager Henig responded that ‘the way you define a daring artistic project as “incitement and racism” is unacceptable to me’, concluding that ‘it is a moving personal work, it is a cry, a shout, it is [Vazana’s] world, and as such, its place is in the Israel Festival’.<sup>48</sup>

The responses of Handelsaltz, who saw mainly ‘ego without borders’, and of ‘A.L.’, who saw incitement that could lead to murder, illustrate how collaborative acting that protests against inequality, and demands justice from a real audience (and the imagined Ashkenazi audience), shapes Mizrahi identity as a demonstration beyond received political and aesthetic boundaries, and raises debate about the ways in which this identity is displayed.

*Simply Yossi Zabari, Papejeena, and Inheriting Son* are autobiographical performances that display Mizrahi identity while amplifying the real elements of their actions, creating political and assertive statements about Israeli ethnic politics. Yossi Zabari displays his body’s virtuosity, celebrating and protesting the mainstream’s racist discrimination against Mizrahi actors. The preparation of food in *Papejeena* interweaves the here-and-now with many childhood memories of Sabbath preparations while pointing to the Catch-22 of conflicting East and West body and food perceptions that undermine the Mizrahi woman’s self-image. *Inheriting Son* is a protest juxtaposing official documents and a personal narrative, and gives a voice to the parents’ generation.

The performances sensitively display the autobiographical materials and personal conflicts which are part of the Mizrahi struggle in various areas. *Inheriting Son* realizes the

rights of residents in public housing, while *Papejeena* presents ethno-gender relations in the family. *Simply Yossi Zabari* shows the theatre itself as based on similar prejudices, governed by the racist dispositions of gatekeepers and tastemakers. By foregrounding real-life stories and incorporating elements of actuality, these Mizrahi autobiographical performances display, celebrate, and construct Mizrahi identity and narrative.

## Notes and References

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25. Susan Bennett, '3-DA/B', in *Theatre and Autobiography*, ed. Sherrill Grace and Jerry Wasserman (Vancouver: Talon Books, 2006), p. 35.

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40. Vazana participated as an actor and then as director in the first wave of Israeli community-based theatre characterized by a Mizrahi protest against Ashkenazi hegemony. Performances dealt mainly with Mizrahi youth and its oppression by the education system and the military. See Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, *Theatre in Co-Communities Articulating Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 79–83.

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46. Nurit Cohen-Evron, A.L., and Ofira Henig, letters given to the author by Shlomo Vazana.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*