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From Object to Subject: Israeli Theatres of the Battered Women

Israeli institutional theatre has only just begun to toy with the idea of 'feminist theatre' and, despite a demonstrable increase in violence against women in Israel, with increased visibility in the mass media, the subject has yet to be confronted in mainstream theatres. However, women's creation has been longer at the frontier of theatre activities, and the issue of battered women has been a central theme of several community-based performances over the past two decades. In this article Shulamith Lev-Aladgem offers an overview of these plays – the first performed by professional actresses who had just graduated from university, and who were mostly Ashkenaziyot (of European origin); the two following produced by community amateur actresses who were Mizrahi (of Arabic origin) – women from a low social stratum who, although being acquainted with domestic violence, had wished to avoid being regarded as battered women; and the last performed by a group of amateur actresses who came from more heterogeneous backgrounds, but who were all being treated in one of the centres for prevention and treatment of domestic violence. The author argues that in the first performance the battered woman was articulated by another, distant woman; in the next two she was presented by a more closely, identifying relative; while only in the fourth production did she publicly represent herself by herself, articulating her own voice through the symbolic system of theatre. The author proceeds to analyze in detail the first and the last of these performances, which clearly present the process of passage from acting woman-as-object to acting woman-as-subject. Shulamith Lev-Aladgem is a lecturer, researcher and practitioner in the Community Educational Unit of the Theatre Department at Tel-Aviv University in Israel, who trained and worked as an actress and community theatre animator/director for many years. Her writings in areas of play theory, and performance and cultural studies, and their relation to community theatre, educational drama, drama therapy, and feminist theatre, have been published in numerous periodicals in the USA, Europe, and Israel, and her article 'Ethnicity, Class, and Gender' is forthcoming in *Theatre Research International*.

WOMEN'S CREATION on the contemporary Israeli stage is a somewhat contested issue. Surveying the present developments in Israeli drama indicates by comparison with previous years an increasing number of plays written by women, and this is now evolving into a legitimized artistic phenomenon. Nevertheless, a careful study of the nature of this shift from woman as text to woman as author reveals that female play-writing has actually become a trademark for mainstream commercial success, which profits the theatre establishment.¹ The contribution of the new age of female directors to Israeli feminist theatre is also under debate. Does their artistic work posit a new tactics of representation aiming to generate an alternative gaze? Or does it actually present only

strategies of pretence that in fact reproduce the patriarchal dichotomy?²

While it seems that the Israeli main stage has just begun to toy with the idea of 'feminist theatre', shifting the focus of attention from the front to the frontier of theatre activities may locate those moments of women's creativity that are waiting to be contained by a feminist critical gaze. In this article I shall discuss two such moments, both of which relate to the issue of battered women.

Statistically, violence against women in Israel has been constantly increasing, with 15 per cent of all families currently suffering from domestic violence;³ yet this crucial subject, which is now visible in the mass media, has not yet been symbolically confronted by the main theatres. It has, however, become

the central theme of several community-based performances during the last two decades. These have included *Battered Women* (1981), by the Theatre Group in Neve Zedek;⁴ *Every Seventh Woman* (1997–98) by the Shkumat Hatikva Community Theatre;⁵ *And That God Will Help You* (1999) by the Jaffa D' Community Theatre;⁶ and *A Plague not Written in the Bible* (2000) by the Center for Prevention and Treatment of Domestic Violence in Hertzlia.⁷

The first of these productions was performed by professional actresses who had just graduated from university, and who were mostly of Ashkenazi (European) origin. The two following were produced by community amateur actresses who were Mizrahi (of Arab countries origins), women from a low social stratum who, although long acquainted with domestic violence, had strongly resisted being labelled battered women. The last production was performed by a group of amateur actresses from more heterogeneous backgrounds, but who were all being treated at the Center for Prevention and Treatment of Domestic Violence.

In the first performance, therefore, the battered woman was articulated by another, distant woman; in the next two she was presented by a more closely, identifying relative; while only in the fourth production did she publicly represent herself by herself, articulating and signifying her own voice through the symbolic system of theatre. I have therefore chosen here to analyze the first and the last of these four productions, which clearly present the process of passage from acting woman-as-object to acting woman-as-subject.

Documentary Theatre as Social Activism

Battered Women was co-produced by Tel-Aviv University and the Neve Zedek Theatre Group in 1981 in Tel-Aviv. The significance of this performance as a cultural text requires first a reference to the issue of battered women within Israeli public discourse as perceived at that time. At the beginning of the 1980s the first three shelters for abused women had just been founded. An investigation by the Interior Committee of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) had found that

out of 1,500 women who had sought judicial help, 55 per cent testified to having been battered. The Committee reached the conclusion that although battered women generally tended toward a conspiracy of silence, 5 to 10 per cent of all married women in Israel were being abused.⁸

The common approach to violence against women perceived the phenomenon mainly as an esoteric, ethnic problem among Mizrahi, low-status families. Within the dominant Ashkenazi discourse, battering women was just another sign of the backward Oriental sub-culture, which 'permitted' the Jewish or Arabic husband to batter his wife. As such, this interpretation only reinforced legitimization of the 'reeducation' projects of the establishment, which sought to transform the Mizrahi minority from 'the other' to 'us' as soon as possible. Consequently, there was no policy or specific treatment for the problem of battered women, since their problem was defined as just a part of the entire extended ethnic problem of the Mizrahi group.⁹ This kind of patronizing reading silenced and excluded the issue of battered women from the public sphere.

Against the background of this socio-cultural invisibility, *Battered Women* was a primary symbolic disruption which stood for social agitation. The activist impulse of the performance was linked to the artistic agenda of Nola Chilton, one of the leading directors and acting teachers in Israel. Born in the US, where she became involved with theatre for social change, she made her name as a director and actors' coach on Broadway and off-Broadway. When she immigrated to Israel at the start of the 1960s, she brought with her the American social activist spirit, experience of the genre of documentary theatre – and the intention to appropriate these to the Israeli social context.

Her main artistic base, from the 1970s and for over two decades, was Haifa Municipal Theatre which, as a leading theatre operating geographically and mentally distant from the cultural centre of Tel-Aviv, was and still is looking to its own socio-artistic particularities. Thus, Chilton was warmly welcomed by this theatre, and her artistic work has

continued to contribute to the centrality of a socio-political direction in the profile of Haifa Municipal Theatre until the present.

Chilton was the first to confront the ethnic problem on the established stage through productions such as *Joker* (1975), *Crisa* (1976), *A Bicycle for a Year* (1977), and *Endgame* (1978).¹⁰ She challenged the actors (mostly of Ashkenazi origins) as well as the theatre-goers (also mostly of Ashkenazi origins) with Mizrahi characters as protagonists, thus marking as an issue that which was constantly being erased as a non-issue. She introduced community-based methods, urging the actors to live within the minority group, with each one carefully studying one individual as a source for a prototype character. To reinforce the documentary level of the performance as an accurate citation of the social reality, she used a hyper-realistic acting style, calling upon the actors to avoid 'pretence', thus minimizing as much as possible the 'as-if' principle.

Chilton saw herself as the creator of a theatre that provided 'a rare opportunity to people on the fringe to be in the centre', and was sincerely determined to use socio-documentary plays 'to penetrate and change the process' that she described, after Foucault, as 'abstract awareness, ignoring the human reality which frequently accompanies denial of the "other"'.¹¹ This activist ideology and practice became the basis of the *Battered Women* project, which focused on the problem of battering not as an issue in itself but rather as another dreadful symptom of the Mizrahi ethnic problem.

The Artistic Process of 'Battered Women'

A few years prior to the production, when the first shelter for abused women was opened, Chilton had been called upon to produce a theatre show on this poignant topic. However, this 'passionaria of the deprived groups'¹² rejected the request on the basis that 'the feminist issue is not something that turns me on. . . . There are more urgent subjects in the country. . . . I am simply against feminist propaganda.'¹³ A while later, the idea came up again from a

very different direction. As an acting teacher within the Theatre Department of Tel-Aviv University, Chilton was asked to produce a documentary performance with the graduating acting class, which exceptionally comprised only women. Among the possible female subjects for treatment, one of her colleagues suggested to her the idea of the 'battered woman'.

Seven students visited the shelter for abused women in Hertzlia over a period of eight months, each of them forming an intimate relationship with one of the women there, listening to and recording her story, and adopting in detail her way of speech and movement. These taped materials were edited, arranged, and directed by Chilton to look like a 'literal transfer of raw material to the stage',¹⁴ in order to act 'as a piece of social action, making people aware of a sad phenomenon in our society'.¹⁵

Thus, her decision to deal with the issue of battered women came primarily out of functional necessity, and only as long as it could be appropriated as an additional potential case study for her theatrical representation of the ethnic problem. This position, I suggest, determined all her poetic strategies, which indeed objectified the battered woman and, as such, signified her case as a horrible and perverse sensation.

Performance Analysis

After several performances at the University Theatre of Tel-Aviv, *Battered Women* moved to the new quarters of the Theatre Group in Neve Zadek, a slum neighbourhood at that time. This real marginal geographical setting acted as an extension of the interior stage image. In an open space, the audience were seated on plain benches arranged around the playing area, which was filled with unmade beds, baby cots, blankets, open suitcases, potties, dolls, and toys. Under-distancing the audience and actors by putting them both on the same level and within a condensed space was intended by Chilton to confront the usual escapist expectations of the Israeli audience: 'I do not want the audience to sit far and think to itself – I am outside it, it does

not concern me. . . . Theatre that people come to in order to run away from life does not interest me.¹⁶

In the opening scene, the actresses were seated on a row of benches in front of the audience, each wearing ordinary casual clothing – mostly jeans, bare feet, and untidy hair. One by one, the girls introduced themselves with a short autobiographical account focusing on a detailed description of their sex life. At the end of each ‘personal piece’ the actress visually transformed herself into the specific character of a battered woman by means of props such as an Oriental kerchief, a rumpled housecoat, or a broom.

After recounting her dreadful life, the character removed the props that had symbolized her as a battered woman and transformed back to her persona as an actress. This passage from ‘life’ to ‘theatre’ and back to ‘life’ was a poetic device intended to function as a means of obscuring the borderline between the real and the fictional, and of reinforcing the authentic level of the performance. Chilton explained her choice in ethical terms, too: ‘If the women are exposed to their bones, then the actresses too should be exposed to a certain degree.’¹⁷

An Invasive Gaze

Her genuine desire was thus to create a closeness and alliance between the Ashkenazi ‘well educated, cultured, and talented’¹⁸ acting graduates and the women from the shelter. She tried to attain this through the actresses’ ‘confessions’ at the beginning and closure of the performance, but the passage from the representation of woman as actress to that of woman as battered, and then back again, operated in fact as an apparatus that generated ‘difference’ and bi-polarity. Chilton used fashionable images to signify woman as actress/artist such as bare feet, jeans, and unkempt hair, and then marked the transformation act through common Mizrahi female images such as a kerchief of a certain style and colour, a frumpish housecoat, a broom or ‘baby’ held in the arms.

This visual gap was also enhanced by the mental distance between the actresses’ per-

sonal revelations about their sex life and the personal revelations of the battered characters about their sexual abuse. Against the background of the ‘normal’ sexual problems of the actresses, such as being too introvert, childish, needing a steady relationship, longing for a penis, and preferring casual sex, the stories of the battered women were bold in their sexual cruelty. The husbands were on the whole characterized as alcoholic, drug-addicted, criminal, and sexually perverse: one had forced his wife to have sex even during menstruation; another imitated hard porn movies, using strange and painful accessories; one had abused his pregnant wife until she delivered a retarded baby; and another had abused his wife’s daughter. The porno detailed descriptions of the sadistic activities of the abusing Mizrahi husbands promoted the politics of the performance aesthetics, which placed the issue of battered women as resulting from the eccentric, sick, and criminal action of the Mizrahi man.

The poetic device by which the actresses introduced themselves as ‘themselves’ thus reinforced their distanced mental and social position, and objectified the battered women to their invasive gaze. This process was enhanced by additional aesthetic choices which ‘bestowed’ upon the battered women a heavy Oriental accent, broken Hebrew, and exaggerated gestus. According to Urian, this external representation was part of Chilton’s comic strategy, intended to produce ‘liberating laughter’ among an audience who were being confronted with a harsh depiction of reality.¹⁹

Despite Chilton insisting that her presentation gave an accurate portrayal because ‘this was simply the reality we found’,²⁰ I would none the less contend that comic relief was not in fact her conscious premise, but more a product of an unconscious stereotyped point of view which led her to make certain artistic choices and not others. The audience, who shared with Chilton the same conscious or unconscious patronizing stand, decoded the representation of the battered women as humorous and funny. As such, they were also stigmatized as irrational, subscribing to witchcraft activities (‘Pity you

didn't know me before. I could have taught you magic against this magic. . . . You take grass and stones, put them in the fire and dance and dance, you dance it on the person's head and it draws out all the spell').

Moreover, the battered woman was displayed as an oppressed individual who was indifferent and cold-hearted to another, similarly oppressed group: 'Arabs are not human beings. . . . You cannot educate the Arabs. . . . They should be expelled immediately. . . . This is a Jewish State.' These choices of representation decentralized two important components of the narrative: one, that battering has never been an exclusively ethnic problem ('Do you know how many lawyers' and doctors' wives are ringing and coming here?'); while the other refers to the social and cultural discrimination of the Mizrahi immigrants by the Ashkenazi veterans.

Do you know what happened when we came to the country? We were put, at once, in a town named Shlomi. We arrive, and what do we see? Nothing. Darkness of Egypt and metal huts. . . . Sometimes we had no water, so we used to run to the fields of the Kibbutz . . . and my mother used to work for the Kibbutz in the cotton fields . . . and Passover came, and we were given special permission to have a hot shower in the Kibbutz. So we walked there one hour on foot. We got there, but no shower was there . . . they were afraid we would mess their shower. . . . Once, abroad, a family was a family, a father was a father, a mother was a mother. I remember when we first went to school. We were nice, happy and tidy. The first thing the teacher said to us is, 'Here you cannot speak Arabic! Here is not Iraq, not Tunisia, not Morocco, here you will speak only Hebrew.' They made us feel that everything we possessed should be erased.

The disproportion between the abundance of voyeuristic sexual reports and the paucity of other life materials created not only a distorted image of the battered woman but also reduced Chilton's 'super objective' of the performance – to raise audience awareness of the Mizrahi ethnic problem.

The documentary technique, which aimed at minimizing as far as possible the gap between text and context, nevertheless emphasized the real social and cultural position of the speaking subject (actresses and direc-

tor) in relation to the battered woman. She, the spoken object, was in fact subjected not so much to an identifying but more to a humanitarian, merciful gaze, in a search for sensational moments that would shake the socially dormant audience.

Battered Woman as a Speaking Subject

From the 1990s on, the expression 'battered woman' entered the vocabulary of journalism as well as that of academic and social welfare circles. Different measures were taken to handle the problem, such as the foundation of additional shelters, guidance and treatment services, new arrangements in hospital emergency rooms, new orders to the police service, and new legislation against violence that enabled the police and the courts to remove a violent husband from the home for a period of up to six months.²¹

Nevertheless, as Svirski indicates, although the issue is now more visible in the media, it is still depicted either as a romantic problem or a family tragedy. 'It seems', she protests, 'that the problem has been conceived, over time, as belonging to the welfare service, and as such it does no longer disturb the existing order.'²² Within such a socio-cultural context, *A Plague Not Written in the Bible*, performed by a group of clients from the Center for Prevention and Treatment of Domestic Violence in Hertzlia, is a unique symbolic act through which battered women themselves challenged the social order, and proposed an extended, more feminist conception of domestic violence.

The appearance of battered women on the public stage as speaking subjects constituted a cultural document with significance to society at large and women in particular. And it is important to note that this community-based performance has now been running all over the country for more than two years.

Therapists from the Center, who had become acquainted with the work of the community animator and director Hana Vazana and the community playwright Ora Habib (who themselves worked together in Shkumat Hatikva, where they produced the

performance about battered women, *Every Seventh Woman*), decided to invite Vazana to organize a community theatre group at the Center. The basic assumption was that community theatre, as a means of self-expression which generated drama from within and to a given community, might serve as a new and advanced model for group therapy.

The Center, which is based on the feminist approach, provides various individual and group treatments that combine to construct a therapeutic process. In the first stage, the battered woman works to reach the moment when she is able to admit, first to herself, and then to her peers, that she is a victim of violence. In the second stage she acts to recover the mental strength to take responsibility for her own life.²³ The frame of community theatre is offered to generate an additional circuit in which to expose a secret, that of symbolic and public admission, in front of the community, which marks the zenith of the therapeutic process. The clients, as artists/actresses, exhibit a sense of self-esteem and involvement, an ability to express a social statement, and a strong will to reintegrate into the community at large.²⁴

A Plague Not Written in the Bible exemplifies the creative process through which a therapeutic group of battered women has appropriated community theatre, which is accepted today as a local representational practice, to tell of themselves, by themselves. For about a year, Vazana guided the women to act out repressed life materials through dramatic exercises such as visual images, body movement, dough-sculpturing, storytelling, personal letters, monologues, and role-playing.

In the course of activity the participants were invited to Shkumat Hatikva Community Theatre to meet the actresses who had performed *Every Seventh Woman*. Later on, the actresses from the Center hosted the group from Shkumat-Hatikva. These encounters, which operated as consciousness-raising events for both groups, particularly empowered the actresses from the Center, who realized their uniqueness as the first battered women to break the conspiracy of silence, literally as well as symbolically.

Vazana and Yael Tagrin, the social worker who accompanied the sessions, documented all the self-texts of the women, which later became the source material for the play written by Ora Habib, and then rewritten by her following critical comments of the group.

Performance Analysis

A Plague Not Written in the Bible depicts the daily experiences of women who are living in a violent relationship. The narrative focuses on the liberating encounter between three sisters and their mother on the eve of Pass-over, at the mother's home.

Community theatre in Israel is mostly issue-based and tends to the realistic style. *A Plague Not Written in the Bible* appears to follow this pattern, and so it is with a realistic key that I shall initially attempt to decode the performance, hoping to expose those 'feminist materials' that contribute to the discourse about gender and to the dynamic construction of female identity through the symbolic deconstruction of the prevalent approaches to the battering of women.

The set reveals the interior of a very simple apartment, indicating the low status and traditional origins of the family. The kitchen, stage right, is represented by a few props such as a low shelf full of plates and a small round table with bowls filled with various fruits and vegetables. Centre stage is a green armchair and two smaller chairs, and at the back there is a window with curtains, above which hangs a picture of an open holy script and a rabbi. Stage left holds a simple iron bed with a figure lying on it, silent, completely covered by a blanket.

The widowed mother is busy preparing the holiday evening meal together with her daughters. Danielle, the oldest daughter, is a big woman, about fifty, married with children, dressed in a long dress and wearing a hat, which indicates her religious lifestyle. By contrast, Josepha, the younger and single daughter, who has just arrived from Paris, is wearing a fashionable and sexy outfit, which suggests her mental and geographical distance from the family home.



A Plague Not Written in the Bible. The mother is sitting, with Danielle and Josepha standing behind.

At this particular reunion, these women, encouraged by Josepha, manage for the first time to break the barrier of silence, and to discuss the roots of their distress in front of each other. The mother admits, at last, that her abusive behaviour against Josepha was her painful projection as a battered wife who could not produce boys. Josepha confesses that the violent relationship between her parents led her to behave like a boy, to run as far away from home as possible, and to choose to be totally independent and single. Danielle reveals, for the first time, that her husband has been abusing her mentally for a long time. He avoids her intimate approaches, excludes her from the Sabbath service, harasses her when she talks on the phone, and has blocked their bank accounts to make her beg him for money.

The story of the family, which is revealed step by step through the dialogues between the three women and a few short flashbacks, creates a contrast to the behaviour of Igaella, the youngest daughter, who stubbornly continues to sleep, deliberately cutting herself off from her surroundings. The exposure of the mutual pain constitutes solidarity between the three women, which empowers them to rouse Igaella out of bed. The final

scene clarifies that the whole performance has developed as a conspiracy of silence that is finally moving towards being dismantled.

Igaella, the pride of her family, a beautiful and educated woman who is married to a successful, well educated, and Ashkenazi man, is a battered woman too. She acts like a typical abused woman, despite being educated and professionally successful. She blames herself, trying to make it up to her husband, and keeping her situation a secret. He has struck her even though she is pregnant and, bleeding, she has fled to her mother and is now hiding in the shelter of her bed. It is only in the last scene, encouraged by her sisters and mother, that she dares to get up and to reveal her bleeding body and soul. On Passover eve, the traditional holiday celebrating the liberation of the people of Israel from the Pharaoh, Igaella decides to take responsibility for her own life. The end of the performance signals but the beginning of this liberating journey, which is supposed to free Igaella and her potential peers among the audience.

This is a first, realistic reading of the performance by the tenets of community theatre in general. But as this is community theatre produced by a unique group of women,

I suggest that we also need to undertake a 'resistant reading', which deliberately transgresses the explicit meaning of the text, and locates the subversive tactics of the actresses/director that deliver the additional, extended meanings of the text.²⁵

Deconstructing the Myths

The decision to locate the narrative of *A Plague Not Written in the Bible* on Passover eve is seemingly an obvious symbolic device anchored in the central liberation myth of Jewish-Israeli culture. But in order to create a genuine parallel between the mythic liberation and the concrete liberation of the women, the actresses intervene and 'disturb' the mythos by making present its feminine absent part. The title of the performance indicates that from the actresses' point of view battering women is as dreadful as the Ten Plagues that God brought down upon Egypt. But, while the Ten Plagues won figurative realization in the Bible and various metaphoric uses ever since, the symbolic silencing of battering is a constant phenomenon, and is only temporarily halted by the performance, which makes present an 'unspoken' plague that is absent from culture.

The first feminine image to appear on stage is thus that of the 'cleaning woman'. Danielle vigorously scrubs the table, and frenziedly polishes the silver cutlery. This repetitive activity, which characterizes her throughout the whole performance, is consolidated into a visual motif followed by repetitive sentences such as, 'There is a lot of work now', 'There are so many more things to do', 'I haven't managed to do anything'. The actress obsessively polishes the cutlery again and again, until the realistic style of acting is disturbed by a Brechtian *gestus*, which moves the spectator's attention from the textual signified to the signifier.

To ensure that the audience does indeed perceive the image, the mother performs the interpretive function, saying: 'What is happening with you? Cleaning like a crazy woman, enough!' 'Are you crazy? Cleaning the house like a polishing machine.' In this way the actresses create the subversive

dimension of the accepted image of the 'cleaning woman', which signals that from her point of view the immense work expected on the eve of Passover is actually the opposite of liberation, and much more than usual – as the mother says: 'Fifty years I'm preparing Passover and I don't rest for a moment. To rest now? At Passover? Who rests at Passover?!'

The women prepare the holiday for the men, who conduct the service without any symbolic reference to them. Therefore, in the Passover service that the battered women present on stage, they articulate feminine experiences that are excluded from the official traditional text of the holiday. Josepha for example, says, 'What a smell! The smell of Passover, food together with detergents. The food disappears after a day or two, but the detergents drug me for a week.' When she realizes that Danielle has decided not to return to her home, and that Igaella persists in sleeping, Josepha suggests two alternative options for the usual service: 'We'll sing songs, invite Chippendales who will dance for us, Mother will cry for Dad, it will be fun. Maybe we'll join Igaella and we'll do the holiday in bed?'

Josepha also replaces the traditional order of symbolic questions and answers with her own confrontation: 'I have the first question honouring the holiday. [To her mother] Are you free? And you [to Danielle] are you free? Do you live in a great light, or in the darkness?' Josepha initiates a journey of revival, which indeed constitutes an alternative service, conducted by the mother who uses the traditional patterns to deliver the concrete liberation story of her real family instead of the mythic one: 'How is this night different from all other nights? [To Igaella] You will protect your baby, you will get out of bed, you will eat, you will say "I'm not guilty" In what way is this night is different? This night you will make a move, you will take responsibility for your life.' This alternative Passover service on stage is both a feminist challenge of the traditional, male order, and a public declaration of a new order of life by which the women reject any expression of violence, and move toward self-liberation.



Scenes from *A Plague Not Written in the Bible*. Top: Danielle with her daughter. Bottom: the mother knits, with Danielle and Josepha on the right.

Another myth challenged in *A Plague Not Written in the Bible* is that of family. Throughout their lives women passively assimilate various axioms about how they should function within their families. Some of these indirectly support violence against women, and lead them to accept it submissively, such

as: 'The unity of the family is important at any cost'; 'The responsibility for the man's behaviour depends on the woman'; or 'Everyone gets what he deserves.' In the performance the actresses deconstruct the myths of the family through the conservative character of the mother, who is the

bearer of the popular ideology of the woman of valour. When Danielle tries to convince her mother that she has reached the limits in trying to hold on to her abusive marriage, the mother blocks her: 'What kind of a mother leaves her kids? It's not like you. Do you want to cause harm?' She also attacks Josepha, her single daughter:

A woman without a man? Lonely? How can a woman feel good without a man? . . . And if she becomes free, wouldn't she feel imprisoned inside herself? . . . Why should I open up my secret? Who will close it back? It will only leave pain.

The mother thus constantly refuses to contain her daughters' pain, instead reiterating the oppressive myths that have made her endure her own husband's violence and transfer it to her daughters.

The turning point comes when she confronts the cracks in the mythos of non-violent, educated, beautiful bourgeois couples. When the mother realizes that Igaella's 'wonderful, excellent husband, I wish you [Josepha] such a husband', has beaten her daughter until she bled, immediately she abandons her patriarchal conformity, and declares for the alternative, liberating path: 'It must stop now! Now! All of us were punished enough for things we didn't do.'

'Miming' the Image of the *Femme Fatale*

Josepha, who has just arrived from Paris, bearing gift bags full of silk and muslin lingerie, is wearing a tight red dress, high-heeled shoes and red beret. She moves her delightful body gracefully, with extrovert sexuality and expressive nonchalance. This female image is constructed, at first glance, in accordance with the basic patriarchal cultural principal, displaying 'woman' as an exhibitionistic performance subjected to the male gaze. As such, Josepha is characterized through the basic male representational mechanisms: she behaves outrageously, displays a daring style of dress accompanied by such fetishist accessories as red high heels, red beret, and shining bags, and is therefore a *femme fatale* who must be re-educated and

converted.²⁶ The part of re-educator is conventionally fulfilled by the mother, who tries to persuade her daughter to become a good, meek wife and mother.

But the construction of Josepha as *femme fatale* is also a form of cultural 'citation' which, as Butler indicates, is never an accurate repetition of the original image.²⁷ The central function of Josepha as a critical character which generates the narrative is to expose the citation not as mimetic reproduction of the accepted *femme fatale* image, but as a mode of 'miming' that ironically disturbs the image, and subversively plays with it.²⁸

The ironic play of Josepha is intended to invert the inferior image of the *femme fatale* into a form of declaration that will sabotage the familiar image. She refuses to co-operate with her mother's regime of silence and denial, delivering oppositional statements with humour and self-awareness. She creates short shock effects, which not only break the conspiracy of silence but also posit an alternative feminine life-style. She consciously enjoys her looks, exhibits a logical and determined thinking competence, a sharp tongue, and leadership skills. She chooses to live independently, sometimes alone and at other times with a man whom she favours according to her own standards. She is open-minded, direct, and adventurous, taking life in a playful and pleasurable way. The actress as Josepha actualizes a sort of wishful thinking, a latent fantasy – 'I'm your dream, day and night you are praying to become like me' – and by embodying this on stage she validates it as a possible option, as a substantial part of the new and complex female identity formation.

Gender, according to Butler, is not a given static socio-cultural construction but a dynamic performative category, constantly generated in the course of action.²⁹ Butler indeed refers to the performative stratum of everyday life, but, as I suggest, in the symbolic context of the theatrical performance her conception gains extra relevance. The character of Josepha is not a faithful reproduction of an accepted cultural image, but a new image which is generated from within, and in confrontation with the familiar image,

through the symbolic actions of the actress as character. Thus, the woman-in-red is a clear outcome of the way the actresses have appropriated community theatre as an arena to contest the significance of 'gender'.

The difference in representation between *Battered Women* and *A Plague Not Written in the Bible* is partially due to the shift in public discourse in relation to the issue of battered women. While at the beginning of the 1980s this was perceived mainly as a local, restricted problem of the 'uncivilized' Mizrahi minority group, since the 1990s battering has become defined as domestic violence, and has been treated as a more extensive and complex social problem.

However, as I have suggested, the distinction between the two performances is mainly an outgrowth of the identity and social positioning of the performers themselves. The shift from a distant, humanitarian speaking subject, that stands for the battered woman, to the battered woman who speaks herself on stage signifies the passage from acting woman as the object of a voyeuristic, invasive gaze to acting woman as the subject who appropriates the gaze through the medium of community theatre, and looks back, deep into society, with a critical gaze.

The narrative of *A Plague Not Written in the Bible*, which was based on personal materials of the actresses, publicly recreated their transformative process, moving from the phase of self-accusation and denial, to the phase of self-awareness, and then to the active phase of revealing the secret and taking responsibility for their lives. However, the production was not only a representation of the empowering process that these women had experienced in the past, through the various therapeutic sessions and the production process of the performance, but also in itself constituted an additional empowering process, 'here and now', through the course of the performance event.

The public performance thus reinforced the actresses' determination to confront violence and marked their new, more extensive and positive social identity. Moreover, the text constitutes a contribution to the discourse about gender, and the meaning of battering

as an existential feminine sensitivity constructed in western society in general.

Notes and References

1. Gad Kaynar, 'Looking-at-Being-Looked-at-ness', in *Teatron: an Israeli Quarterly for Contemporary Theatre*, No. 5, 2001, p. 5.
2. Dorit Yerushalmi 'Strategies of Pretence: on the New Age Female Directors', *ibid.*, p. 23–32.
3. As reported by the Israeli daily newspaper *Yedioth Ahronot*, 25–26 November 2001.
4. Neve Zedek was in those days a disadvantaged neighbourhood of Tel-Aviv. Over the years it has become a centre for artistic creation and recreation.
5. An underprivileged neighbourhood in Tel-Aviv inhabited mostly by Jews of Yemenite origin.
6. Another poor area of Tel-Aviv inhabited by Israeli Arabs and Jews of Oriental origins.
7. A town in the centre of Israel. This performance is still running in cultural centres all over the country.
8. Barbara Svirski, 'A Shelter for Battered Women: an Intermediary Report, November 1977–March 1978 (Jerusalem: Centre for Advanced Services, 1978) [in Hebrew].
9. *Ibid.*
10. Dan Urian, 'Israeli Theatre and the Ethnic Problem: the Case of Nola Chilton', *Assaph*, No. 16 (2000), p. 135–56.
11. Ziva Shapran, television channel, *Encounter with Documentary Theatre*, 1976; programme notes to *Bicycle for a Year*, Haifa Municipal Theatre, 1978 [in Hebrew].
12. Adit Naaman 'To Act Battered Women', *Yedioth Ahronot*, 10 July 1981.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Mendel Kohansky 'For Battered, for Worse', *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, 4 January 1981.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Adit Naaman, *op. cit.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. Haya Joseph, 'Between the Hammer and the Anvil', *Chotam*, July 1981.
19. Dan Urian, *op. cit.*
20. Adit Naaman, *op. cit.*
21. Barbara Svirski, *op. cit.*, p. 238.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
23. From my interview with Danielle Mack, the manager of the Center.
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28. Elin Diamond, 'Mimesis, Mimicry and the True-Real', *Modern Drama*, XXXII (1989), p. 58–72.
29. Judith Butler, *op. cit.*