

Stage animal / Michael Handelzalts

A matter of perspective

Israel-European theatrical collaborations are no longer rare, but rarely does a co-production seem as necessary as Sara von Schwarze's 'In Between,' a joint production of the Cameri and Stuttgart's Schauspielbuhnen theater

Co-productions between Israeli and European theaters have become less rare in the past decade, if not longer. This does not necessarily say anything about the caliber of Israeli theater: The European Union encourages and even allocates funding for cultural collaborations, and European theaters tend to look for multilingual partnerships.

This speaks on one hand to some pan-European ideal of a common denominator between peoples and languages, and on the other hand to a naive belief that at its best theater is an international language, and the language spoken on the stage is just a random convention. There is also the excitement of a singular undertaking, a potentially intriguing encounter among different directors, actors, playwrights, designers and audiences. In short, a relatively low-risk adventure, since the process itself and the connections that are forged are no less important than the result, that is, the play.

Naturally, the European artists who choose this route, and I believe I would not be wrong to say that German theaters are among the most keen of them, tend to seek counterparts with a shared background or topic to address. Given that, there is no more natural collaborator for German playwrights than Israeli actors, directors and playwrights: The terrible shared history of these two nations, and the complex present stemming from it, are fertile ground, almost too fertile, in which to develop plays. That is, the events happen before an audience that is very sensitive to the issues and how they are raised.

Over the past few years we have had the privilege to see Yael Ronen's "Third Generation," in collaboration with Habima and Berlin's Schaubuehne theater, and "Post-Trauma," seven skits written by seven playwrights from Israel and Germany (the latter from the Dusseldorf Theater), performed here by Habima actors under the direction of Dedi Baron and there by German actors. The Beit Lessin Theater has done several projects with German theaters, in no small part a result of the German orientation of its dramaturge, Avishai Milstein, and his expertise in and connections to German theaters.

Another natural partner is the Polish theater. We were able to see "Noah's Ark," by the Poznan Theater in collaboration with Austrian and Italian theaters as well as Tel Aviv's Cameri. Habima collaborated with a theater from Wroclaw in the development and production of two parallel plays under the single heading "Tykocin - Bat Yam," directed by Yael Ronen from Israel and Michal Zadara from Poland.

These types of projects are always at least somewhat interesting, with bright and less-bright flashes and a brief shelf life, in part as a result of the complex logistics.

On rare occasions a project is based on a written play that two theaters (in this case, from Israel and Germany) wish to produce, and whose unique nature demands a partnership.

"In Between," by the Cameri and Stuttgart's Schauspielbuhnen, is a fine example of a collaboration that not only has the right concept or yields an intriguing result but also would be difficult to imagine in any other framework.

It begins with the unique personality of Sara von Schwarze, the playwright



Sara von Schwarze (left) and Cornelia Heyse in "In Between." Had someone presented such a play to a theater director it probably would have been rejected as too implausible. Yossi Zwecker

and one of the play's three actors. Her personal story, which she did not choose but whose accompanying guilt she must address, is the embodiment of the complexity of German-Jewish-Israeli relations: Her German parents converted to Judaism after World War II (probably in part in response to the guilt felt by the post-war generation of Germans) and came to live in Israel with their daughters. Von Schwarze is therefore German, Jewish and Israeli all at once. Had someone presented such a play with such a main character to a German or Israeli theater director it probably would have been rejected as too implausible.

Esthetic confusion

To the credit of von Schwarze, who has turned in impressive performances at the Cameri Theater (including as Lely in Anat Gov's "Best Friends" and Laura in Strindberg's "The Father") and Tel Aviv's Tmuna Theater ("Everywhere in the Bathtub Where There Is No Water"), it should be noted that the play she wrote is surprising in its dramatic skill, which stems from her mix of identities.

In a very tight and realistic framework that demands control of dramatic technique, her alter ego in the play runs away from Israel (for reasons that cannot be revealed without giving away a spoiler) to her father's home in Germany. On the surface she has come to settle things with her father. He dooms her to an emotional rift whose main elements are guilt and shame, and himself fled a similar crisis, as she understands it, when he abandoned her in Israel (of the occupation and the first Lebanon War) and returned to Germany, where he lived as a Jew with a German wife.

Such a plot gives the playwright and

the actors much space in which to ask what the characters know about each other and when and in what language they obtain this information. Ruth, the heroine (Von Schwarze), reveals her father's German-Jewish past to his new German wife. She does so in German. (There are Hebrew subtitles for the Israeli audience.) At the same time she converses with her father in Hebrew (with German subtitles for the performances in Stuttgart). A meaningful moment, when Ruth tells

of the nature of Jewish, Israeli and German identity evoke resistance and even antagonism. It takes some courage for an actress to play someone who is unsympathetic and unattractive.

On the other hand, even though the father would seem to be responsible for her situation, in that he thought only about his own welfare and conscience without considering what he was doing to his daughter, von Schwarze lets him demonstrate his

of the play. But she also carries with her, in a certain sense, the lesson of this play about the mix of identities. This is actually reflected in a subplot that seems unrelated to the main topic: The father's new wife had been a lesbian, and Ruth thinks this was withheld from her father. Sabina, the wife, explains calmly that a person lives with a given identity until circumstances arise that cause them to change it, after which they try to live with this changed identity.

Heyse's acting abilities stood out, in my opinion, when she moves toward Gorenstein with raised fists as if threatening to hit him (after hearing information him that reveals him in a new light), and the threatening move turns into an embrace. The play achieves some resolution with an anticlimax that stands in slightly disappointing contrast to its complexity, and this is nicely expressed, as with Heyse's hand motion as she hands the telephone to von Schwarze in a gesture that concludes the play.

It seems quite clear that "In Between" could only have been staged as an Israeli-German co-production. I am willing to go even further and say that although the caliber of this production is based on the bilingual abilities of Cameri actors von Schwarze and Gorenstein, it benefits from having been staged initially in Stuttgart, by a German director, Manfred Langner. In my assessment an Israeli director who would have thought first and foremost about an Israeli audience, viewing some of what is said on stage as obvious and perhaps even unnecessary. It is the German directing perspective, apart from the acting, that imbues this play with the sense that perspective is all, and that in any case things are not always as they seem.

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her father and his wife why she ran away from Israel, occurs within the plot in German, and that is also how it was performed in Germany. In the Israeli staging Von Schwarze spoke in Hebrew; since the mix of languages is part of the play's convention the Israeli audience was able to accept this and to believe that the father's wife, a German actress, understands what is being said. Here it seems that the Hebrew language, which is standard for the stage in Israel, "acted" for a moment in a German role. This amusing confusion is part of the play's esthetic.

To Von Schwarze's credit again it can be said that she doesn't go easy on herself: Her character's aggressiveness, radical arguments and even childlike and uncompromising simplicity when it comes to complex is-

own distress to the audience and demand a measure of understanding for his predicament.

In the Israeli production the role is played by Eli Gorenstein, whose first language was German even though he, unlike von Schwarze, is not a "real" German. He tends to act very broadly, which serves him well precisely when he must meaningfully utter a declarative statement such as "I feel Jewish."

Threat that turns into a hug

The third role in this particular production is played by Cornelia Heyse, a German actress, who as far as the dramatic writing is like the audience: The father and the daughter share information that the wife and the audience learn during the course