

Olga Gershenson, **Gesher: Russian Theatre in Israel, A Study of Cultural Colonization**, Peter Lang Publishing, 2005, 230 pp, \$39.95 (paperback).

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According to Stuart Hall, minority members must "inhabit at least two identities, to speak at least two cultural languages, to negotiate and to 'translate' between them" (Hall, 1993: 362). This seems to be especially true in regard to the *Gesher* Theater (*Gesher* means Bridge in Hebrew), an ambitious enterprise of Russian immigrants, established in 1990 in Israel. *Gesher* has had to find its way between the Russian and Hebrew languages, the European and Israeli cultures, and professional and ideological values. But has it succeeded in this complex task and what forces have been employed in this process? These are the main questions at the center of Gershenson's book.

After a short introduction to the ideological context of immigrants' reception in Israel and the cultural context of local theater production, Gershenson provides us with a rare glimpse into the backstage of *Gesher's* creation (see Chapter Four). The story begins in early 1990 as a massive wave of immigrants from the former Soviet Union brought to Israel a substantive group of actors headed by a charismatic director and a talented manager. From the very beginning, the theater's agenda was purely professional, and the founders' main attempt was to avoid the theater's framing as an "ethnic phenomenon" or as a "cultural ghetto." And yet, despite *Gesher's* efforts to position itself as "just a theater" without an ethnic or ideological agenda, its reception by the Israeli establishment and especially by the Israeli media was in terms of immigrant absorption and interethnic relations.

In this regard, Gershenson's book belongs to an extensive body of literature analyzing immigrants' representation by the host media, but it is novel in that it focuses on the media framing of cultural organization, established by the immigrants. Unlike previous studies, Gershenson does not focus on media stereotypes, which ascribe the immigrants as a faceless collective, nor on the particular cases of immigrant involvement in "deviant" behavior (Elias & Bernstein, forthcoming; Hussain, 2000; Lemish, 2000; Santa Ana, 1999). Instead, Gershenson tells us a fascinating story of complex relationships between a new theater and the host press.

Gershenson divides the *Gesher's* history into seven main periods (and thus seven main chapters of the book, from Four to Ten) beginning with its first stages, via its first success, first crisis, the peak of fame in the middle of the 1990s and then its downfall by the end of that decade and the search for a new direction after 2000. During all of these stages, the Israeli media continued to evaluate *Gesher* upon one decisive criterion: its commitment to the host cultural values. As such, from its first productions, despite the critics' enthusiastic reception of the theater's professionalism and high artistic quality, two main demands (nearly ultimatums) were placed on the new born theater: to act in Hebrew and to get in touch with the Israeli culture (p. 50).

Stemming from this framework, whether the reviews were positive or negative, they were similarly loaded with the dominant ideology. Accordingly, the Israeli critics praised the theater's swift transition into Hebrew in the early 1990's, even though the actors could not speak the language and had to learn their scripts phonetically, without understanding exactly what they were saying, thus prioritizing the language over performance. Likewise, the media discussion of *Gesher's* productions was always accompanied by questioning its choices of dramatic materials, that is to say, what "Russian immigrants' theater" can or cannot perform in terms of a "proper" cultural choice.

It is not a coincidence, therefore, that *Gesher's* first success was its performance of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (see Chapter Five), staged in Hebrew. Thus, according to Gershenson: "Their [Russian immigrant] otherness was mitigated by their great assimilation-driven desire to perform in Hebrew and to be part of Israel. Yet, they did not claim to be 'real Israelis' and to misplace Israeli cultural producers from their position of cultural competence - they did not dispute the ownership of symbolic capital. *Gesher* confined itself to the content of Russian classics. It was a win-win situation and everyone [i.e. Israeli media] loved it" (p. 68).

Yet, when *Gesher* decided to push further in the direction of becoming a "genuine" Israeli theater and started approaching Israeli-Jewish materials, the Israeli critics took an ambivalent and sometimes openly negative stance. Thus, *Gesher's* first "local" cultural performance named *Adam Resurrected* (see Chapter Five) touching the theme of the Holocaust, was heavily criticized by the Israeli media, questioning the director's Jewish identity, his own exposure to the Holocaust, and the right of "Russian immigrants" to represent a topic located at the heart of the Israeli hegemonic culture. Similarly, a satiric play named *Eating* (see Chapter Seven), based on the Hebrew Bible, but loaded with a political criticism of the contemporary Israeli society, was rejected by the Israeli press, thus denying the immigrants' right to produce a political satire of the hosts and their culture. As a result, the theater has been forced to look for a refuge in the "neutral" ground of the Russian and European classics.

Accordingly, Gershenson's study emphasizes once again that the host media cannot tolerate the ethnic minorities' hybrid identities; whereas one identity rooted in the Russian culture is presented by the media as an anti-thesis of the Israeli one, thus constructing the immigrants' "otherness". In this regard, an interesting question is whether or not the Russian-language newspapers, also established in Israel at the beginning of the 1990s (Caspi et al, 2002), challenged *Gesher's* stereotypical representation by the host media. That is to say, did the media established by the minority itself serve as a community shield, struggling with ethnic stigmatization? Or did the Russian newspapers criticize the *Gesher* Theater for its speedy assimilation into the host culture, thus causing its delegitimization as a communal cultural institution?

And finally, we should emphasize that Gershenson's book is not only about the host media's reception. First and foremost, it is about an immigrant theater, which strives to find its way in a new country, and to gain its right to authentic cultural expression. Throughout this uneasy journey *Gesher* has established strategic friendships with major Israeli politicians and the mayor of the Tel-Aviv municipality (where the theater is located) in order to increase its funding, as well as with the representatives of the Israeli cultural elite in order to gain public recognition. In parallel, the theater maintained connections with

the Russian immigrant community and succeeded in preserving a theatrical atmosphere typical of the Russian school. As such, this book will be of value to students and scholars interested in migration and interethnic relations; it provides a fascinating example of immigrant adaptation, ethnic maintenance and intercultural exchange.

### References

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