

CALL FOR PAPERS

INTERNATIONAL STUDY DAY

Jewish Theatre as an Object of Anthropological Study

INALCO, Paris, 28 June 2022

ORGANIZED BY

DOCTORAL SCHOOL 265 *Langues, littératures et sociétés du monde*, INALCO Paris

PLIDAM (Pluralité des Langues et des Identités : Didactique, Acquisition, Médiations),
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ARGUMENT

Theatre emerged centuries ago as a form of cultural expression, in the West and in the East alike, in of its aesthetic aspects. It is a constant presence in the so-called « Western » sphere, one that flourishes in spite of a legacy of mistrust (up to and including prohibitions) based on philosophical and theological considerations (see Plato, *The Republic*, Book III, 394 and Book X, 604-6; Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, Book III, 2). This link between theatre and society – a mixture of hatred and fascination – gave birth to various areas of socio-anthropological thought. Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), resorting to the notion of theatre, interpreted the very world of human social interactions as a form of scenic performance.

Among the Jews, theatre is conceived of in various and contradictory ways, although there is true that there are very few direct sources between the Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. The denunciation of theatre in Judaism is a relatively late phenomenon, which is mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud (Avoda Zarah 18b) discussing a *baraita* dating most likely from the beginning of the Christian era.

And yet, theatre is certainly present among the Jews from the Antiquity onward, notwithstanding the tension between the Talmudic proscription and the actual practice. In addition to the few mentions in *Aristae's Letter*, Philo and in several inscriptions, we know of a Jewish playwright exiled in Alexandria who wrote, in Greek in 200 BCE, a play entitled *Exagoge*, only fragments of which survive. The text, known to be a *tragedy*, is based on the biblical story of Exodus.

Centuries later, the first play in Hebrew (*A Comedy of Betrothal*) was written in the Renaissance Italy by a Jewish intellectual living in Mantua, Leone de' Sommi, as well as the first treatise on theatre staging (*Four Dialogues on Scenic Representation*). This latter text, written in Italian, is at once a polemic « dialogue » with Aristotle's *Poetics* and a reconsideration of the origins of theatre (which origins, he considers, are biblical and cabbalistic). For Sommi, the question of the body takes precedence over the text of the play (as dramaturgy), proposing a new optic for a Jewish history of theatre, even more so given that his works are of biblical and Talmudic inspiration.

The Italian-Jewish influence will determine some of the further developments in Hebrew drama; the poetic conventions of the Italian language will likewise be a major factor in the evolution of the Hebrew metrics. A growing interest in translating literary works into Hebrew includes also writing and adapting dramatic works. An example of this kind of double influence can be seen with some Dutch writers, such as David Franco Mendes, whose adaptation of *Athaliah* bears influence of Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the French theatre and the Viennese oratorio.

In all these cases, the fundamental question remains the one of the attitudes towards the Hebrew language: can the holy tongue be used as a vehicle for secular literature? The question is sometimes implicit, other times raised by the writings that accompany theatre production (for example, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's *Leshon Limmudim*, on Hebrew stylistics).

Considering the concrete presence of these primary sources, as well as the authors that might be seen as founding figures, how are we to understand theatre from a Jewish vantage point? Is it an anthropological object, bringing together and affirming a kind of Jewishness understood through its relationship to the theatre? In other words, can theatre be understood as a *medium* for the Jewish subject? Is it (also) a subject of controversy, occasioning a rereading of Aristotle with the idea of Hebrew (and religious) origins of theatre? Is there a common thread uniting Jewish theatre aesthetics that can be discerned all the way from Ezekiel the Tragedian, considering subsequent developments (biblical adaptations, Purimspiel, Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish theatre, memory theatre, contemporary Israeli theatre, or Jewish theatre in languages other than Hebrew)? Can Jewish theatre be studied independently of its links to the Bible? In what ways, and what about the historical and biblical subjects we find with most authors?

The conference is aimed principally at PhD candidates from a range of disciplines whose academic interests revolve around the Jewish languages and theatre and/or anthropological dimensions of Performing Arts. Other proposals from individuals within the academic community or artists are also welcome.

Conference paper proposals of around 250 words (in English or French) are to be sent to the members of the organization committee (alexandru.bumbas@inalco.fr and anamarija.vargovic@inalco.fr) by February 20, 2022, 23:59 CET (Paris time).

Please make sure to add a brief bio-bibliographical profile. Candidates will be contacted by the end of March 2022. The languages accepted for the conference are English and French.

There is a possibility for the papers to be published in a special issue on the online artistic-academic platform *IN VIVO ARTS* (www.invivoarts.fr).

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