

a performance in that language, and the presence of a theatre of international stature in their midst was a luxury beyond their means.

Now, 37 years later, Habimah is only one of more than a dozen companies performing in Hebrew, with the population of Israel approaching three million and only the most recent immigrants still not knowing the language, the theatre is as much part of the nation's cultural life as are the schools. The forthcoming change in status of the two major companies amounts to an official recognition of this fact.

There are many reasons for the uncommon popularity of the theatre in Israel. The most outstanding is the fact that theatre in this country reaches even the smallest urban and rural communities, unlike the situation in other countries where attending a performance is a privilege reserved for those living in the large centres. All companies, with the exception of the Haifa Theatre, are based in Tel Aviv but they spend much time on the road. Among the regular theatre goers are members of kibbutzim which are periodically visited by all theatres. Performances are usually held in kibbutz auditoriums, and in some cases several settlements join forces to arrange performances in the regional open-air amphitheatre, taking advantage of the fact that in

Israel the skies are clear for about eight months in the year. The theatre also visits army bases, and the Army regularly arranges collective visits of soldiers to the home halls of the theatres.

Writing of the state of the theatre in Israel one faces the danger of the facts recorded no longer holding true by the time the reader is reached. For the theatre here is in a state of constant flux. New companies rise and fall and change character with such rapidity that the entire picture may change within one season. This situation prevails only since the beginning of the '60's; during the four preceding decades the development was slow and ponderous. There was the Ohel established in 1926 as a Workers' Theatre with the aid of the Histadrut (General Federation of Jewish Labour); then Habimah settled in the country. In 1944 the Cameri was founded by young actors as a reaction to the conservatism of the two older companies; then in the '50's some feeble attempts were made at establishing new companies, none of them of lasting consequence.

It was the beginning of the '60's that saw what amounted to a veritable theatre explosion. A new major company, the Haifa Municipal Theatre, was established and countless small and medium sized experimental and not so experimental

groups rose to fill every available hall and cellar in Tel Aviv, and the purely commercial theatre made its triumphant entry. The theatre goer who until then could pick from among three or four productions an evening, suddenly found himself confronted with a choice running the full gamut of the modern theatre, from the classics to an American-style musical, including the latest in the European avant garde.

Understandably, quality not always followed quantity. In fact, some of the new companies riding the rest of prosperity were pretty shoddy and soon disappeared, while in the better productions one found half-baked actors hired for their parts because all qualified members of the profession were employed elsewhere. But this proliferation gave a chance to all the talent which was hitherto either idle or forced to travel abroad, to show its mettle, and within a short span of years a whole new generation of directors, actors, designers and choreographers succeeded in completely rejuvenating the Israeli theatre.

Part of this proliferation was the establishment of the American musical as an integral component of the entertainment scene. My Fair Lady became an unprecedented success, followed by other musicals of American origin, and later by Israel-oriented musicals which broke all attendance records.

As had to happen sooner or later, the period of expansion was followed by a period of contraction. Some of the new groups did not prove to be viable and disappeared; others found it advisable to merge with established companies. Thus the number of productions available is now considerably smaller than it had been in the past few seasons, but on the whole the quality seems to be improving, and the new development — though it is much too early to assess it — may have an advantageous effect.

One major problem with which the Israeli theatre has so far struggled unsuccessfully is the lack of a sizable body of original plays. The repertory of the theatres consists mainly of translated plays, with no more than four or five original plays performed per season, few of which are of high quality. Everyone recognizes the fact that no good national theatre can develop without national playwrighting, and much has been done in recent years to promote it. The theatre managements

give careful consideration to every original play submitted, and the Public Council for Culture and the Arts offers prizes and other inducements to budding playwrights. If the results have so far been disappointing, the causes should be sought in the mysterious chemistry of artistic creation. Hidden as it is from us, we do know, however, that the art of playwrighting flourishes

only in countries which have had a theatre tradition of many years' standing. In the 50 years of its existence the Israeli theatre has produced a number of minor playwrights. This should be encouraging, but Israel is a nation in a hurry expecting to achieve in decades what other, greater nations attained over centuries of slow development.

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