



Lee Perlman, *But Abu Ibrahim, We're Family!* (Tel Aviv: Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2017), 198 pp. Paperback, \$20.00.

The apparently intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been part of both societies' lives for so long that it has penetrated almost every aspect of their being. These societies experience what is referred to as a 'culture of conflict' (Bar-Tal 2013) in which the conflict is present in most of the societies' activities. Thus, cultural products such as films, theatrical performances, and novels cannot avoid intensively dealing with the conflict. But such texts, which address 'reality' on the one hand but are 'fictional' on the other—have a special quality: they can provide us with perspectives and insights that are not necessarily seen or heard in discourses not defined as fiction (Benziman 2011).

Lee Perlman's book explores these complex relations between fictional texts and the non-fictional conflict taking place in Israeli theater's first decade of the twenty-first century. The book focuses on four joint Israeli-Palestinian productions—*Ga'aguim* (Longing), *Elef Laila V'Laila* (A Thousand and One Nights), *Plonter* (Tangle), and *Hummus Chips Salat* (Hummus, French Fries, Salad)—and raises some fundamental questions about them. Does working in partnership with the other side inadvertently mean cooperating and collaborating with the enemy? How does the reality outside the theater influence the process of producing a play? Can the theater create its own community with different, more inclusive norms than the Israeli-Palestinian reality? To what degree do the plays reflect the world that they are constructed in and to what degree can they influence the world outside of the theater?

In order to tackle these issues, Perlman simultaneously discusses the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the time that these plays were performed, the process of creating the plays, and how they were received. His research includes a description of the plays and an analysis of each, interviews with some of the main figures from the productions, and an attempt to deal with each production separately but also to tell the bigger story of all of them collectively. This detailed research provides a holistic picture of the creation of the productions and provides the reader with an understanding of their complexity, which is composed of both seemingly tiny details—like how an actress got involved in *Hummus Chips Salat*, and how her presence changed some of the texts, including lines like "she doesn't look like an Arab woman" (163)—and the larger, more notable aspects, such as the checkpoint setting at the entrance to *Plonter* at which the audience had to present ID cards.

Perlman's holistic approach gives the reader an insight into joint Israeli-Palestinian productions, but a distinction should be made between the content of the plays and the context of the world that they are produced in (i.e., both the context of Israeli theater and that of the conflict). Regarding the content of the plays themselves and the process of producing them, Perlman provides some very interesting insights. For example, he asserts that even if the productions did not necessarily intend to do so, they were conducted like dialogue/group interactions between Israelis and Palestinians, some resembling the contact model and others the confrontational one. Another fascinating observation is his claim that in *Ga'aguim* all the characters share a feeling of displacement and that therefore this feeling is the common ground, which might be true for all joint Israeli-Palestinian productions.

Perlman also relates some eye-opening stories from the production process, such as the uncomfortable feeling of Israeli-Jewish actors when, during rehearsals for *Elef Laila V'Laila*, they participated in interactions in Arabic, a language that they did not understand. Another tells about the relation between the plot of *Hummus Chips Salat*, which deals with the festival in which it was presented, and its postponement because of events happening in 'reality' in the city of Acco.

Perlman concludes the book by asserting that the four productions can "serve as a tentative model of shared citizenship in the workplace—showing how Jewish Israelis and Palestinians can work together in professional settings, through ongoing negotiations toward equality within the present political situation" (175). He further states that "these Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian theater artists, who choose to work together and create these 'communities of identity', choose to confront and humanize Palestinian-Jewish relations" (176).

But when looking at these four productions in the context of their relation to the reality of the conflict and of Israeli theater, it should also be noted that if such a model of 'shared citizenship' exists, it is very marginal. First and foremost, although the author claims that two of the productions are part of "the core of the Israeli theater milieu" and the other two are "part of fringe, small-budget, 'alternative groups'" (176), none of these plays are part of the mainstream canonical theater in Israel. *Ga'aguim* was produced by the Arab-Hebrew theater of Jaffa, and *Hummus Chips Salat* was created for the Acco theater and Acco Festival, neither of which is a mainstream Israeli theater.

Likewise, *Elef Laila V'Laila* was jointly produced by Habima and the Arab-Hebrew theater of Jaffa, but the plays themselves were not performed in established Israeli theater halls. *Plonter* is a production of the mainstream Cameri theater, but was shown only in the small Cameri II

and Cameri III halls. Most of its shows were performed outside of Israel. Its funding came from outside sources, and it cannot be seen as part of the repertoire of the theater that is aimed at the 'average' theatergoer. So even these rare incidents of joint ventures were not really expected to address most Israeli audiences. On top of that, the asymmetric relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinians were present to some degree in the plays, since Jewish-Israelis initiated most of the productions and comprised the majority of actors and production staff.

If this book focused only on the scripts, plots, and performances of the four productions, it could have presented an optimistic view. The work of producing such plays, as Perlman claims, might show signs of a more equal relationship between the two sides. But Perlman's smart decision to understand these productions in the context of the outside world that the actors come from and return to, before and after rehearsals and performances, provides a gloomier picture. The asymmetry in power between the sides and all its implications are part of the creation of fiction, even when trying to create a different kind of atmosphere. It is part of the creation of theater in Israel, even when fiction is produced by those who are seen in Israeli society as far-left-wingers, and even in the theaters that the minister of culture wants to investigate and cut funding for.

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REFERENCES

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