

**Dorit Yerushalmi**

The University of Haifa

# Can Theatre Help Repair Damaged Urban Fabric?

## Toward a “Thick” Description of Haifa’s Wadi Salib Theatre Center

### **Abstract**

This article explores roles of theatre as an urban cultural institution in Haifa’s politics, urban order, and spatial imagination—a “wounded city” (Till, 2012) infused with Jewish and Palestinian histories. The case study is the theatre center in Wadi Salib, founded in 1983 in a repurposed Palestinian building. The author proposes a theatre historiography of crises, dimming hopes, and even failure that temper the sense that theatre-makers can enact change, reconcile community wounds, and spark critical discourse. The article explores the theatre center through three spatial dimensions: the historic building and its location, the theatrical space, and then

the repurposed Al-Pasha Complex building as a ruin. The author demonstrates how the center's activity exposed both the wounded urban fabric and the theatre's institutional inability, even when partly funded by the municipality and the state, to be an active, sustainable agent and partner in reconciliation and healing.

### Keywords

theatre in repurposed building, municipal theatre, Jewish, Palestinian, Arabic, theatre in Israel, Wadi Salib, ruin

### Abstrakt

#### **Czy teatr może naprawić uszkodzoną tkankę miasta? „Gęsty opis” Wadi Salib Theatre Center w Haifie**

Artykuł omawia funkcje teatru jako miejskiej instytucji kulturalnej w polityce, organizmie miejskim i wyobraźni przestrzennej Hajfy, „zranionego miasta” (Till, 2012) przenikniętego żydowskimi i palestyńskimi historiami. Studium przypadku dotyczy centrum teatralnego w Wadi Salib, założonego w 1983 roku w palestyńskim budynku. W wybranym przez autorkę modelu historiograficznego myślenia kluczową rolę odgrywają kryzysy, gasnące nadzieje, a nawet porażki, które ograniczają poczucie, że twórcy teatralni mogą wprowadzać zmiany, łagodzić rany wspólnoty i pobudzać krytyczny dyskurs. Autorka analizuje funkcjonowanie centrum teatralnego w trzech wymiarach przestrzennych: historycznego budynku i jego lokalizacji, przestrzeni teatralnej, a następnie zaadaptowanego kompleksu Al-Pasha jako ruiny. Dowodzi, że działalność ośrodka odsłoniła zarówno zranioną tkankę miejską, jak i instytucjonalną niewydolność teatru – nawet częściowo finansowanego ze środków miejskich i rządowych – jako aktywnego, stabilnego i sprawczego uczestnika procesu pojednania i uzdrawiania.

### Słowa kluczowe

teatr w zaadaptowanym budynku, teatr miejski, żydowskość, palestyńskość, arabskość, teatr w Izraelu, Wadi Salib, ruiny

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How does one explore a theatre situated in the midst of a devastated urban environment? Does one start with the pains that a city's scarred body suffers? Or with ideology and praxes that led to the devastation and continue to exploit it? This article explores the roles of theatre as an urban cultural institution in Haifa's politics, urban order, and spatial imagination—a “mixed city” in northern Israel, sprawling across the mountainous coastal landscape and infused with Jewish and Palestinian histories.<sup>1</sup> Events of April 1948 have left a gaping wound in Haifa's urban fabric and have shaped its planning in recent years. However, it provides a particularly interesting case in the landscape of “mixed cities,” given the disturbing disparity between the city's image among Palestinians as a symbol of the *nakba* (catastrophe) in 1948 and its conventional image among Jewish Israelis of a shining example of Jewish-Arab coexistence.<sup>2</sup>

Cities have always been vulnerable to violence, war, and acts of destruction. Karen Till defines “wounded cities” as those damaged and rebuilt in an historical process of physical demolition, uprooting, personal and social trauma, and ongoing violence. The forms of violence characterizing wounded cities persist for decades, shaping social and spatial relations over long periods.<sup>3</sup> A wound is a bodily place that has been forced open: torn, bleeding tissue, an external injury after a stab or cut in the flesh. Wounds incurred from inside may indicate bodily inflammation. Till argues that progressively minded residents, artists, educators, and activists in wounded cities re-examine meanings of “the right to the city,” promoting and supporting political actions of testimony that commemorate a past continuing to haunt the present, while also remembering injustices and inequality. She strives to show how these actions define communities that imagine a better urban future, allowing planners, policy makers, and theorists to relate ethically to urban changes.

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<sup>1</sup> The origins of Haifa's development as a modern city date back to the Ottoman period, when the city was rebuilt in the mid-eighteenth century by Dahir al-Omar, the autonomous Arab ruler of northern Palestine, in a sheltered position alongside the new seaport. By the early 1900s, the city's population grew faster than that of any other city in the region, spurred by foreign investment and construction of the Hejaz Railway. Under the British Mandate (1921–1948), Haifa became the British Empire's major hub in the eastern Mediterranean, in both economic and administrative terms.

<sup>2</sup> The term “mixed city” was coined during the British Mandate in Palestine and has been widely used to denote towns with Jewish and Arab communities existing under the same municipal jurisdiction. It is associated with five cities: Akko, Haifa, Jaffa, Ramleh, and Lod.

<sup>3</sup> Karen E. Till, “Wounded Cities: Memory-Work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care,” *Political Geography* 31 (2012): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.10.008>.

The concept of wounded cities that Till has formulated greatly inspire the discussion, understanding, and reflection of the historiography of Haifa. However, the story I want to tell is one of deepening urban wounds, a process in which the Haifa Municipal Theatre took part. Theatre practitioners are social agents, yet their power is limited, especially when faced with ongoing civil inequality between Israeli Jews and Arabs and national conflict. The historiography I propose, therefore, is one of crises, diminishing returns, and even failure—not only of moments of artistic success. It is a story that can temper hopes that theatre practitioners can amend, reconcile, and heal wounds, and generate critical discourse about existing conditions.

My case study is the theatre center which was also called Stage 2, located in the Wadi Salib neighborhood and founded in 1983 in an abandoned, repurposed Palestinian building of the Al-Pasha Complex—a cluster of spacious halls with arched ceilings, characteristic of the Ottoman style. Stage 2 was part of the expansion of the Haifa Municipal Theatre.<sup>4</sup> The location of Wadi Salib (*salib* is Arabic for the Christian “crucifix”) signifies both the neighborhood’s street level, and topographical feature and a traumatic wound in the city fabric. The historian Yossi Ben-Artzi suggests treating Wadi Salib as a term that “harbors certain historical and social contexts that extend beyond the city of Haifa.”<sup>5</sup>

The present study of the center’s history is based on specific spatial-precinct research, with the premise that from this reading we will learn about complex links between the theatre and Haifa as a wounded city, to continue with Till’s term. This approach, known as micro-history, directs our focus on a single specific case in order to examine its various layers. Micro-history is a project addressing people’s daily lives in a broad cultural context, thereby engaging in a dialogue with cultural materialism—an approach manifested in the field of theatre and performance studies that researches various theatrical spaces.

According to Jen Harvie, cultural materialism is a spatial practice, an ideal means of making sense of social space in relation to theatrical space. In Harvie’s *Theatre and the City*, she names “space, institution, structures and practices, money and people as the ‘material conditions’ of theatrical meaning-making.”<sup>6</sup> Michael McKinnie’s *City Stages: Theatre and Urban Spaces in a Global City* is an

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<sup>4</sup> The Haifa Municipal Theatre was established in 1961 in the Hadar HaCarmel neighborhood, which had been built in 1920 as a garden city for the Jewish population on a topographical shelf between the lower city and the Carmel heights. It was the first repertory theatre in Israel founded “from above”—i.e., by municipal fiat, as a political-cultural act in a Hebrew city that sought to be a cultural center for the Jewish population, like Tel Aviv.

<sup>5</sup> Yossi Ben-Artzi, “Wadi Salib and Its Role in the Development of Haifa” [in Hebrew], in *Requiem to Wadi Salib*, curator Gershon Knispel (Haifa: Bet HaYotzer, 1989), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Jen Harvie, *Theatre and the City* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 24–25.

illuminating example of what McKinnie calls “an urban geography of theatre”—meaning the complex intersection of civic planning, a city’s distinctive political economy, real-estate trends, among other factors—in order to chart their mutual effects on theatre productions.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, both Harvie and McKinnie are expanding on Marvin Carlson’s seminal work *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, which linked cultural materialism as a methodology to the (then) emerging “spatial turn” in theatre studies. Carlson argues that in some instances the geographical location of theatres within urban landscapes is a response to the city’s existing structures—paths, nodes, districts, edges, and landmarks by which inhabitants navigate—and in others their locations have helped in the formation of those elements.<sup>8</sup> He notes that theatre is made not only through the action that takes place on stage, but that:

the entire theatre, its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location within the city, are all important elements of the process by which the audience makes meaning of its experience.<sup>9</sup>

Drawing on Carlson, this research evokes certain questions, such as: how did Stage 2 in Wadi Salib take part in the urban policies of conservation and renewal? Who profited from Haifa’s expansion of theatrical activity? What emotions were sparked by the theatre’s location, and how did that location affect audiences? How does urban renewal through theatre become a distraction? To address these questions, I will discuss Stage 2 through three spatial dimensions: the historic building and its location, the theatrical space, and the Al-Pasha Complex (in which the theatre was located) as a ruin.

In framing the above, I will first provide a short outline review of the violent war that occurred in Haifa in April 1948. This resulted in the erasure of the Palestinian urban realm, including in Wadi Salib. Then I will focus on the building’s history and on local protest for its preservation, to explore a dual mechanism: municipal plans that were founded upon and expressed the erasure of the Palestinian urban legacy, and the municipal theatre’s pragmatic need of an additional building to help separate its experimental-performance and mainstream venues. The theatrical spaces of three productions, staged in the center’s first years of

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<sup>7</sup> Michael McKinnie, *City Stages: Theatre and Urban Space in a Global City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 10–12.

<sup>9</sup> Carlson, *Places of Performance*, 2.

activity, will be discussed to demonstrate their innovative utilization of Arabic as the onstage language, as well as the political meaning and manifestation of that innovation. Continuous exploration of the environment and the center's history reveals that its activity had uncovered a wounded urban fabric while also exposing the inability of a theatre institution, even when funded in part by its municipality, to become an active agent influential in communal reconciliation and healing processes.

## Haifa as a Wounded City

The Wadi Salib neighborhood was established in the mid-nineteenth century by the Ottoman-Arab governor, Dahir al-Omar, beyond historic Haifa's eastern gate. Wadi Salib expanded rapidly in the early twentieth century after the al-Hijaz railway station opened in 1905, then again when the new port was built by the British in 1933. By the 1940s, Wadi Salib had become Haifa's largest Arab neighborhood, sprawling over some 170 *dunams* (seventeen hectares; forty-two acres), and home to over 5,000 inhabitants—many of them migrants from numerous hamlets surrounding Haifa.<sup>10</sup> In May 1948, like the city's other Arab neighborhoods, Wadi Salib was emptied of the majority of its Palestinian residents. After Israel's military operation to demolish the Old Town—extending from eastern approaches to the sea and the Mount Carmel slopes, comprising homes, markets, cafes, clubs, and shops—the neighborhood was reduced to some 300,000 cubic meters (392,000 cubic yards) of rubble mounds. As W. J. T. Mitchell explains: “The expulsion of the local inhabitants is not enough—the landscape itself must be cleared of vestiges of them, their demands, and their history.”<sup>11</sup> Out of around 70,000 Arabs in Haifa, only about 3,500 remained; they were relocated to the Wadi Nisnas neighborhood, into homes of Palestinians who had been deported or had fled. “It's a horrific thing to see a dead city,” reported Golda Meyerson (Meir) a few days after its occupation, following her visit to Haifa.<sup>12</sup> **FIG. 1** shows the destruction of 220 Old Town homes on Wadi Salib slopes in April 1948. Any Palestinian homes left standing after the operation were quickly

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<sup>10</sup> Tamir Goren, “Biography of a Neighborhood” [in Hebrew], *Cathedra: For the History of Eretz Israel and Its Yishuv*, no. 133 (2009): 161–164, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23408345>.

<sup>11</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Sacred Landscape* [in Hebrew], trans. Rona Cohen (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2010), 77.

<sup>12</sup> Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1991), 185.



**FIG. 1** View of the destruction of the Old Town in Haifa

appropriated as abandoned, state-owned property.<sup>13</sup> Within a few months, with the municipality's encouragement, Wadi Salib's Palestinian residents had been replaced by Jews (mostly immigrants from North Africa). In the summer of 1959, hundreds of these new residents, fed up with abysmal conditions in those abandoned, crumbling homes without infrastructure, held violent street demonstrations in the well-to-do Hadar HaCarmel neighborhood. In their fury at

<sup>13</sup> "Abandoned Palestinian property" refers to assets left behind by Palestinians during and after the 1948 war as they were expelled from or leaving Palestine/Israel. Those assets' legal status was formulated by the 1950 Absentees' Property Law. This law permitted the expropriation of land and assets belonging to Palestinians not in the country on specified dates. Those Palestinian "absentees," former owners of these properties, had been expelled during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War by Israeli forces or had fled to enemy countries in the region and other locations in Palestine. The Custodian of Absentees' Property was in charge of managing these assets until 1953, when the Development Authority was entrusted with this responsibility. In 1960, the Israel Land Administration took charge of these lands.

COURTESY HAIFA MUNICIPAL ARCHIVE, PHOTO STUDIO DAN



**FIG. 2** Then-mayor of Haifa, Abba Hushi, looks on as the houses of Wadi Salib are demolished

the authorities' ongoing neglect and deprivation in their neighborhood, they threw stones, blocked roads, set cars on fire, broke shop windows, and looted stores. Their protests brought to public attention the egregious gap between living conditions in posh neighborhoods of Haifa's upper slopes and the lower town's disgraceful circumstances. The protests prompted the mayor to expedite relocation of all residents to apartment buildings in established Jewish neighborhoods. Wadi Salib, as Yifat Weiss points out, thus was emptied of its inhabitants twice.<sup>14</sup> By the end of this decade-long process, the neighborhood had been entirely cleared. Many homes were demolished; others were boarded up to prevent squatting, then stood empty, exposed to the ravages of time and vandalism. **FIG. 2** shows the mayor of Haifa, Abba Hushi, looking at Wadi Salib houses being demolished in 1964. The neighborhood was left a ruined site in the heart of town. It was both a terrifying and an impressive spectacle: a "monument"

<sup>14</sup> Yifat Weiss, *Wadi Salib: A Confiscated Memory* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2007), 129–141. See also, Yifat Weiss, *A Confiscated Memory: Wadi Salib and Haifa's Lost Heritage*, trans. Avner Greenberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).





**FIG. 3A** Images of ghosts:  
A series of photos at Wadi Salib

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that no one had conceived, sprawling across the steep hillside like a tomb that refuses to disappear or to assimilate into the city, and a testament to what had gradually been obliterated since April 1948.

Various local artists have exposed this repressed memory, mourning the destruction of the Palestinian town and its ongoing erasure. The ghosts of Wadi Salib are apparent in a photo series by Hulud Basel Tunus (**FIG. 3A, B, C**) for the exhibition *Layers* (2010), curated by the painter Yaakov Hefetz at the Pyramid Gallery in Wadi Salib. As the photographer elaborates in an email she sent me:



TRANKS. K



TRANKS. K

**FIG. 3B, C** Images of ghosts:  
A series of photos at Wadi Salib

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I saw them all [the series], one by one, in my imagination, before the shoot. Only the last picture was entirely coincidental. In it, one sees a group of soldiers with a tour guide, who is explaining about the buildings that are destined to be built in “a vacuum.” I asked my friend to approach them and leave the picture of my grandparents at a spot where it could easily be seen . . . . It was the last picture in the entire set: after that, I had no desire to take any more pictures.

## **A Wounded Building: “Conservation” of the Al-Pasha Complex through Theatre**

In the early 1980s, plans were drawn up for the conservation and development of Wadi Salib, including designs for an Artists’ Quarter: the first conservation plan in Haifa.<sup>15</sup> Evacuated Palestinian neighborhoods in Jaffa and in Ein Hud, an Arab village in the Carmel area, had already been converted into bohemian-style Old Towns.<sup>16</sup> Israeli culture sought to convert abandoned ruins into spaces for exhibitions and live performances and to repurpose desolate precincts into festival venues. For example, the Akko Festival of Israeli Alternative Theatre was established in the early 1980s in the Crusader-era fortress complex of Ullamot Ha’Abirim (Knights’ Halls) in Akko (or Acre)—having stripped away all traces of the past legacy and Palestinian identity. Plans for the Artists’ Quarter in Wadi Salib included demolishing the Al-Pasha Complex. A grassroots public campaign by a local Israeli-Jewish activist group opposing the demolition resulted in a compromise, by which the building would be renovated and adapted for cultural uses and integrated into the Artists’ Quarter.

The Al-Pasha Complex was built in the late 1880s for the al-Khalil family, a wealthy Muslim family (Mustafa Pasha al-Khalil, the patriarch, was the governor of Haifa in that period). The magnificent structure is emblematic of the emergence of a local urban Palestinian bourgeoisie, involved in developing trade in the city of Haifa. The complex is situated next to the eastern wall, near the Acre Gate. According to Yossi Ben-Artzi, it was constructed in several stages: the west wing (based on topping large halls with vaulted ceilings) was followed by the east wing, and finally a second story. The structure’s large tile roof stood out from some distance. The halls and rooms were spacious, and some walls

<sup>15</sup> Weiss, *Wadi Salib*, 176–177.

<sup>16</sup> Sharon Rotbard, *White City, Black City* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2005), 223. See also Sharon Rotbard, *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

featured frescoes. It held both the family residence and warehouses for products they traded in.<sup>17</sup> During the 1948 war, the newly established State of Israel appropriated the complex, as it did many other abandoned Palestinian properties.

In light of the Al-Pasha Complex's history and its surroundings—a site symbolizing the growth of Haifa as a Palestinian urban center during the British Mandate and also the destruction of that society in 1948—one might say the complex is a monument, as the theatre scholar Joanne Tompkins does: “a complex locus of memory, power, and identity . . . a symbolic site that resonates with history.”<sup>18</sup> Following the public outcry at its proposed demolition, the municipality offered to revive the Al-Pasha Complex and adapt one of its halls to serve as auditorium for Stage 2 of the municipal theatre. In reality, however, the municipality conserved only ten percent of the Al-Pasha Complex, with an investment of around US\$900,000.<sup>19</sup> One hall was divided into two spaces: a club on one side and a 180-seat tiered theatre on the other. This was in line with intentions of company management to separate their theatre's second stage from its main stage and designate it for experimental productions.

The new venue was situated in Wadi Salib and stood in contrast to the municipal theatre's primary venue in the upmarket Hadar HaCarmel neighbourhood. Stage 2 expressed the aspirations of the municipal theatre managers to reach new audiences, beyond its familiar milieu of the Jewish-Israeli bourgeoisie. It also reflected voices within the theatre to promote artistic dialogue between Haifa's Jewish and Arab populations.

Marvin Carlson asserts that:

an audience not only goes to the theatre; it goes to the particular part of the city where the theatre is located, and the memories and associations of that part of the city help to provide a reception context for any performances seen there.<sup>20</sup>

Drawing on Carlson's explanation, when Jewish bourgeoisie theatregoers descended from upper neighbourhoods of the Carmel to the new Wadi Salib venue

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<sup>17</sup> Yossi Ben-Artzi, “Stage 2, the Wadi Salib Theatre Center” [in Hebrew], program, the Israeli Center for the Documentation of Performing Arts, File No. 12.3.6.

<sup>18</sup> Joanne Tompkins, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 43.

<sup>19</sup> Haifa Municipal Archive, 01268/2 (HA).

<sup>20</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 140.

in the valley, they left an area quite distinct from the lower city.<sup>21</sup> There they encountered the city's gaping wound and were exposed to what Una Chaudhuri terms "geopathology"— i.e., "the problem of place and place as problem."<sup>22</sup> In fact, the location of Stage 2, posed a challenge to Jewish theatergoers, given its inaccessibility by public transportation and their reluctance to make the trip downtown (literally), where they felt unsafe.

In the theatrical events that signified the opening of the new venue, spectators encountered the devastated cityscape, inviting them to relive the violent historical events and imagine the neighborhood's former inhabitants. It also made them witnesses to ongoing oppressions, as embodied by the Palestinian actors of Haifa's Municipal Theatre.

### Theatrical Space in a Reused Building: Healing through Bodies of Resistance

Stage 2 at Wadi Salib was the first Israeli theatre venue to use Arabic as its performance language before a Hebrew-speaking audience. This new approach was introduced in three plays. The first of these, in 1983, was the venue's premiere production, *The Island*, by Athol Fugard, as an initiative of the actors Makram Khoury and Yussuf Abu-Warda (playing the two roles, John and Winston), translated by Anton Shamma.

In *The Island*, John and Winston, two prisoners on Robben Island in South Africa, are rehearsing a short play, "The Trail and Punishment of Antigone," for an upcoming prisoners' event. A rift occurs between them when John realizes his prison term had been reduced and he will be released in three months. Since Winston will continue his life sentence, he nearly refuses to play Antigone. The play's theatre-within-theatre is their means of resistance and protest and a way to escape—however briefly—from the surveillance by Hodoshe, the unseen prison guard who represents apartheid oppression. For the play's final lines, Winston as Antigone tears off his wig and plays himself as well as the role, thus making clear the metaphorical connection drawn between Antigone's prison and Robben Island:

<sup>21</sup> Yossi Ben-Artzi, *The Creation of the Carmel as a Segregated Jewish Residential Space in Haifa, 1918–1949* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2004), 324–330.

<sup>22</sup> Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 55.

COURTESY HAIFA MUNICIPAL THEATRE (UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER)



**FIG. 4** Makram Khoury and Yussuf Abu-Warda as John and Winston in *The Island*, 1983

Brothers and Sisters of the Land! I go now on my last journey. I must leave the light of day forever, for the Island, strange and cold, to be lost between life and death. So, to my grave, my everlasting prison, condemned alive to solitary death. (*Tearing off his wig and confronting the audience as Winston, not Antigone*) Gods of our Fathers! My Land! My Home! Time waits no longer. I go now to my living death because I honoured those things to which honour belongs.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, "The Island," in *Statements* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), 77.



**FIG. 5** Makram Khoury and Yussuf Abu-Warda as Didi and Gogo in *Waiting for Godot*, 1984

In the Haifa production, Abu-Warda and Khoury then discarded their Creon and Antigone costumes and turned to the audience with an emotional appeal as actors and as Palestinian community members. Their Palestinian identities, expressed by using Arabic, tempered the racial issue and shifted the play's context of South African apartheid, imbuing it with local meanings of national and civic oppression, and of performed resistance at the new theatre. The press reported debates among Jewish and Arab intellectuals that took place right after performances in which they considered the analogy between South African apartheid and the Israeli occupation. Thus, the theatre and its activities transformed the stage into a political arena against the local mechanism of occupation and oppression.

The artistic success of *The Island* had profound impact on the director, Ilan Ronen, as was evident in his interpretation of *Waiting for Godot* (1984). In this production, Beckett's stage direction indicating "A country road. A tree" becomes a construction site with a concrete building partly wrapped in scaffolding. Didi and Gogo, played by Khoury and Abu-Warda, are Palestinian laborers from the occupied Gaza Strip or the West Bank, trying to make a living and conversing in Arabic. Upon encountering Pozzo (played by Jewish-Israeli actor Ilan Toren),

who speaks the eloquent Hebrew of a colonialist, they respond in broken Hebrew. Lucky (the Jewish-Israeli actor Doron Tavori) speaks literary Arabic, with his one monologue representing the cry of an Arab intellectual who has become the Jew's "Lucky."

In an interview, Ronen recalls that, as director, he lost control of the work process.<sup>24</sup> For example, Tavori, a left-leaning actor, had agreed to play Lucky only if his lines were spoken in Arabic (which he learned specifically to play the role). Khoury and Abu-Warda's identified with their characters so strongly that it grew hard to differentiate them from their roles. "I was in a difficult position," Ronen said, "Because I am the director who represents the occupying state . . . it was anything but normal work." He added that it was extremely hard to sell tickets in Haifa and mentioned that the performance at the Tel-Aviv Tsavta Theatre had huge success, as it was a left-leaning venue in the mid-1980s. Haifa's audiences were mostly Arab youths from around the city who arrived in organized groups. The Haifa Municipal Theatre also organized an event for local Jewish teachers, eliciting uneasy comments: "It bothered me that an Arab boy was watching an Israeli master with a whip, and Lucky is the poor, oppressed Arab," said one respondent. Another continued: "What is this? Are there no Jewish laborers, only Arab ones? They should be thankful they have work." Yet another asked: "Don't you think you're reducing a play with an existential message to a local national interpretation?" Tavori's response was clear and harsh:

In my view, the ruler and ruled are only palpable in the context of a certain reality. Did you want to hide the play from the Arabs and perform it only before Jews? That outrages me . . . . The basic message of this production is that Jews and Arabs are doing a production together.<sup>25</sup>

Ronen's *Godot* has become a canonical work of political theatre for creating "contact zones" and dialogue between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis.<sup>26</sup> Then *The Pessoptimist*, a solo performance by Mohammad Bakri (staged in 1987), based on the novel *The Strange Circumstances of the Disappearance of Sa'id the*

<sup>24</sup> The interview took place on May 10, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Sarit Fuchs, "Judo and the Palestinian Problem" [in Hebrew], *Maariv*, November 30, 1984.

<sup>26</sup> Since the production's premiere, many articles have been written about it—including Linda Ben-Zvi, "Godot in Israel," *Journal of Beckett Studies*, no. 11/12 (1989): 230–234, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44783083>; Shimon Levy, *Samuel Beckett's Self-Referential Drama: The Three I's* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990); Dan Urian, *The Arab in Israeli Drama and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997); Sharon Aronson-Lehavi and Freddie Rokem, "Word and Action in Israeli Performance," in *Contesting Performance: Global Sites of Research*, eds. Jon McKenzie, Heike Roms, and C. J. Wan-Ling (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 222–235.



*Luckless Pessoptimist*, by Emile Habibi, became a canonical work of Palestinian theatre in Israel.<sup>27</sup>

*The Pessoptimist* focused on an individual, a Palestinian-Israeli citizen by name of Sa'id, serving as a microcosm of the Arab collective in Israel and representing the tragedy of the Palestinian people. Along with its artistic qualities, the play contributed significantly to revealing to Jewish-Israeli audiences the identity dilemma among Palestinians. The character Sa'id veers between pessimism and optimism, armed with both humor and self-flagellation. The play reveals power relations between the majority and the minority in Israel and hardships of the Palestinians that had been experienced by Habibi, the author, as well as the translator, Anton Shamma, and Bakri, the actor, which included Jewish-Israeli attempts to expunge Palestinian culture. Thus, the performance subverted the majority culture's tenets by inviting those audiences to hear the narrative of Israel's Palestinian citizens—a national minority living in a state founded on their homeland's ruins.<sup>28</sup>

Bakri, with fair, radiant blue eyes, sharp facial features, and tall, erect stature, subverted visual stereotyping of an Arab character in Israelis' imaginations. Moreover, his appearance was tinged at the time by his role in the film *Behind Bars* (1984), as a Palestinian political prisoner and leader, a freedom fighter protesting along with the Jewish inmates' leader against oppressive wardens, who were applying a "divide and conquer" policy to keep the prisoners in check.

*The Pessoptimist* is set in the Akko psychiatric hospital. In the opening scene, patients—represented by Sa'id—and staff are celebrating Israel's Independence Day. The celebration comes about when Sa'id/Bakri addresses the audience as though they were visitors or staff, thereby turning them into partners in the performance. Boundaries between fiction and current-event reality are blurred—Bakri, the actor and other characters he has portrayed, Bakri and Emile Habibi—and when Bakri addresses the Jewish-Israeli spectators, the voice is heard of a Palestinian talking with those who represent Israeli occupation. Moreover, as he addressed fellow subjugated Palestinians in the audience, a sense of unity and brotherhood was forged. In the final scene, Sa'id/Bakri sits on a tent stake ("we're all sitting on it") and refuses to get off ("because defeat is preferable to surrender"). The play ends with words that encapsulate Habibi's

<sup>27</sup> Emile Habibi was a political leader, Communist Party member of the Knesset (parliament) for almost twenty years (1953–1972), and an outstanding figure in modern Arabic literature. He had a passion for Haifa, where he was born. Habibi died in Haifa on May 3, 1996, and was buried there. He requested that his tombstone simply read: "Emile Habibi—Remained in Haifa."

<sup>28</sup> Reuven Snir, "Palestinian Theatre: Historical Development and Contemporary Distinctive Identity," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 3, no. 2 (1995): 56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486809508568338>.

COURTESY HAIFA MUNICIPAL THEATRE (UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER)



**FIG. 6** Mohhamad Bakri in *The Pessoptimist*, 1987

perception of the fate binding Jews and Palestinians in Israel, who must find ways to live together: “I am here and you are there. I am the waiter—but without me there is no meal. I watch, I am silent, I am not dead.” Through these words, Habibi/Bakri express their view of those who clung to their lands and homes and remained within Israel: thanks to them, they declare, the struggle over that land has yet to conclude.

Converting a historic building in the heart of wounded urban tissue into a theatre encouraged the Haifa Municipal Theatre management to present plays in Arabic. The inclusion in casts of Palestinian actors promoted a revolutionary theatrical space: they connected the Haifa Municipal Theatre with Palestinian intellectual audiences, established a theatrical public discourse that transcended

the city's internal boundaries, and enhanced the municipal theatre's symbolic capital within Israel and abroad as a theatre which exemplifies coexistence. Yet the above-mentioned three productions had no sequel—both because the theatre found it difficult to attract Haifa audiences to the epicentre of the urban wound and also (or primarily) the productions had appealed a priori only to a small audience that shared those political views. These productions, meanwhile, remain evidence of a time when the Haifa Municipal Theatre promoted political theatre and expressed left-wing views.

### A Ruin: The Theatre's Building as a Metonym of a Chronic Wound

For the anthropologist Ann Stoler, a ruin “is both the claim about the state of a thing and a process affecting it. It serves as both noun and verb.”<sup>29</sup> Stoler proposes peeling from the colonial ruin its romanticized garb, to reveal the forces that generate and then preserve it for political, national, and financial advantage. A few years after adapting part of the Al-Pasha structure for theatre, the idea of turning Wadi Salib into an Artists' Quarter fell apart: high maintenance costs, the enormous investment required to develop a park, the buildings' dilapidated condition, and the comparatively low value of the land made the plan economically infeasible, and it failed to materialize.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the center remained isolated from any urban context of leisure culture. An illegal casino opened nearby, and the streets became home to drunks, pimps, and sex workers. In the 1990s, the theatre repeatedly petitioned the municipality to fully adapt the Al-Pasha Complex for reuse and improve the auditorium's safety and acoustics—but the municipality had other plans.<sup>31</sup> Now and again, directors would chose to work in the space, but for the most part it stood empty.

Theatre history is marked by random choices, chance, and coincidences, and only in retrospect do everyday theatrical events become items for historiographical interpretation. The theatre building stood empty (for more than a decade), and after years of neglect the municipality decided to shut it down. The last play staged in Wadi Salib, in 2004, was *Endgame* by Beckett, directed

<sup>29</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, “Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination,” *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2008): 191–219, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20484502>.

<sup>30</sup> Weiss, *Wadi Salib*, 176–177.

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with Oded Kotler, director of Haifa Municipal Theatre (1990–1998), held on May 29, 2021.

by Dudi Maayan, a well-known director of alternative theatre.<sup>32</sup> For two years, Maayan had worked on a “Wadi Salib” project, as a site-specific performance exploring the roots of the 1959 events (as neighborhood-resident riots had come to be known), and highlighting ethnic discrimination in Israel. However, that project’s budget was cut, and Maayan was offered to direct *Endgame* instead, which he chose to stage in Wadi Salib.

At that time, the neighborhood was going through another wave of erasure: in the 1990s, the municipality passed a landmark resolution to establish a centralized complex of government offices and commercial space, the development of which has caused irreversible damage to the historical environment in the Lower Town: an edifice of twenty-nine floors, the tallest building in Haifa at 137 meters (450 feet; opened in 2002).

In addition, a new Law Courts Hall was built at the ruined fringes of the neighborhood, a huge, multistory building (opened in 2001). The hall, a brightly lit, monochromatic, minimalist, homogeneous structure of pale stone, glass, bare concrete, wood, and aluminium, houses five courts, seventy-three halls and a hundred judicial chambers under one roof.<sup>33</sup> Ruins that remain around the Law Courts Hall and the government compound linger as a testament to the past that cannot be undone, and to the web of national and economic forces that led to their presence.

When the *Endgame* audience arrived at the theatre hall, they encountered a dance club in one of the spaces of the Al-Pasha Complex and the luxurious Law Courts. Maayan wanted to expose the audience to the neglect of the stage, which had become a ruin, so he changed their route into the theatre: instead of the main entrance, they were led to a side door, and from there to the backstage and the cast’s dressing rooms. Thus, they had the opportunity to view the actors at close quarters, to chat, pass nearby, and see the neglected innards of the theatre. From there, a winding corridor led them via the stage to the auditorium where seats were covered in dirty white cloth. The stage setting was a shabby, musty junkyard. The reused building at Al-Pasha, as a ruin (*horva*, in Hebrew), allowed the handful of spectators who did arrive to see the differences between the old ruins and the adjacent new construction, of Palestinian and of Jewish people, respectively. Additionally, it reflected the chronic urban wound and the unsuccessful attempts to totally erase it.

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<sup>32</sup> Dudi Maayan’s productions include the well-known environmental performance *Arbeit Macht Frei vom Totland Europa* 1991, Akko Festival.

<sup>33</sup> Esther Zandberg, “A Hall of Architectural Worship” [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, May 16, 2007.

## Closing Remarks

This article has attempted to discuss the intersection between urban space and theatre and, in the process, raises the question of whether theatre can be a partner in the healing the fabric of what can be termed a “wounded city.” The double trauma of the Wadi Salib neighborhood (the community’s expulsion in 1948, then evacuations through the 1960s, following riots in 1959) has not been addressed but has only intensified—either through years of neglect or through infrastructure renewal and real-estate speculation in the 2000s, carried out oblivious to the area’s Palestinian past. The success of the struggle for architectural preservation of the Al-Pasha Complex and its conversion into a theatre was in fact the utilization of “absentee property.” This conservation and regeneration did not address the complex’s past, thereby dooming it to dilapidation and ruin—the complex had been only partially preserved and renovated, kept in part as a kind of ruin in a bid to promote the precinct’s transformation into an Artists’ Quarter. In the center’s first years of existence, it operated in an environment of ongoing ruination. The theatrical space, alongside the productions featuring Palestinian actors speaking Arabic, made it possible to imagine a political horizon of coexistence, and the usage of Arabic on stage enabled this vision of partnership to be heard and be visible. These productions provided the Haifa Municipal Theatre with symbolic cultural capital—an artistic remnant from a period when mainstream theatre promoted political theatre.

This case highlights a direct connection between a city and theatre, when the Haifa municipality supported the budgetary conversion of the building into a theatre—as well as what happens when the decision comes to discontinue such investments. The municipality’s neglect of the building and its surroundings, which led to the center’s closure, attests both to the inability of a municipally- and state-funded theatre to help heal a wound in the urban fabric and to its indirect complicity in exacerbating the wound. The ruin of the closed, abandoned theatrical center invites us to observe the present configuration of the devastation—a wound that many have been and remain complicit in creating, since it is linked to the city’s past and continues up to the present day. When historiography is written, not about success, growth, and renewal, but rather about deepening wounds and urban ruins, operative forces are revealed that have led to their destruction and can continue to aggravate the situation. Today, all that remains of the center is the ruined hall, with “Stage 2 Wadi Salib” inscribed on one of the building’s walls—the original home of the al-Khalil family.



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**DORIT YERUSHALMI**

PhD, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Haifa, and former Head of Department. Her research focuses on Hebrew theatre historiography, aesthetics and ideological aspects in the works of contemporary Israeli directors, and theatre in "mixed cities."

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